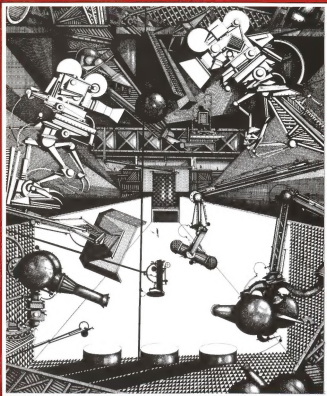


Interzone



SLADEK · REDD · BAYLEY · & OTHERS

Interzone

EDITORIAL

What has today's science fiction got to do with the future?

Say a person has an interest in what the world may be like in five, maybe ten years time? Why should they go to a science fiction book when they can find out about the future from a popular science magazine? After all, the popular image of science fiction derives from the media: ray-guns and monsters, UFOs and cute robots. It has more to do with the past – with the tradition of the genre itself – than with any likely future reality.

The majority of current sf literature belies this popular image, yet much of the best is actually concerned with the present. The stories may have future settings, with aliens and advanced technology, but these are merely props which serve to illustrate a present day concern from a fresh viewpoint. The more topical the subject, and the more important it seems for the future of mankind, the more difficult the "fresh viewpoint" is for the writer to find. Such subjects are getting uncomfortably close to the future. And the future is unfashionable. We have a vague but nagging fear of it. We don't really want it to happen while at the same time we're concerned about the real possibility that it might not. All in all we prefer not to give it too much thought.

Even though subjects like the impact of technology are debated in the media, and even though we are surrounded by computers and other hardware which often seem to have stepped out of an sf book themselves, our perceptions of what the future might be like are really very vague. We may read avidly in that popular science magazine about the technology of 1988 or 1993, but how much does it tell us – and how much do we really want to know – about the world such technology will create?

Even those who seem most concerned about the future may not have a clear perception of what it might be like. How many of those who support CND or the Ecology party actually think very hard about how their ideas might be brought into future reality and how many just want to turn the clock back to a time when the bomb and the industrial society did not exist? Despite our video-recorders and digital watches, we are all in the grip of nostalgia. 1982 was twenty years since the first Beatles record, twenty-five since the birth of Private Eye... And 1983 heralds new anniversaries: new excuses for nostalgia.

Those who have power seem to make plans more appropriate for the past than for the future, but perhaps they just reflect the wishes of a people hungry for bygone eras – and for the nostalgia of feudal fantasy lands and swashbuckling galactic empires.

Science fiction is not the sole concern of Intermore and the future is not the sole concern of science fiction, but we do not intend to adhere to fashion and cast the future aside altogether. It seems a pity that at the very time when the future seems to be advancing ever more swiftly and with ever more dangerous implications, science fiction seems to have been scared away by its very complexity and unpleasantness. People need to be made aware of the fact that the future – for a while at least – is actually going to

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Illustrated by Ian Miller (cover, p.14), George Parkin (p.5), David O'Connor (p.19), Pete Lyon (p.24).

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Calling all Gumdrops

JOHN SLADEK

Mommy and Daddy Mason were up in their own room, smoking a cigar and drinking real chocolate milk. Mommy stood by the window, puffing, waving the smoke out through the screen into the summer night. Daddy guarded the door, hunkered down with his back against it and his bare knees sticking up. One knee had a scab.

"It's awful quiet downstairs," he said.

"You think maybe they went out?"

"Maybe. Not that I care." Daddy Mason took a big swig of chocolate milk and held up the bottle, as though checking its colour. Its colour was brown. "Why don't you go down and see?"

"Why don't you?" Mommy laughed as she passed him the cigar. She climbed up on the top bunk and sat kicking her sneakers against the wall. "You wouldn't dare go down there, not in a million years."

"I would so. I'm not afraid of them." He stepped to the window with the cigar. "You think maybe they went out?"

After a minute, Mommy said, "I'm not afraid of them either. I just don't like them, that's all." Her sneaker toes made precise little rubber stamp marks on the wall, right up to the edge of the Superman poster. "I hate them."

Daddy looked at her. "I'll tell."

"Okay, maybe I don't hate them, but what do I feel? What am I supposed to feel? I've given them the best years of my life - I tried to give them everything. Where did I go wrong? Maybe I loved them too much. Maybe that's where I failed them, I loved them too much." She had memorised this speech from Dorinda's Destiny, a soap opera rich in the raw materials of life. "Life is a whole new ballgame."

In the old ballgame, Mommy Mason had been a public relations coordinator specialising in rodeos and stock car races. One afternoon her boss, Tony Murth, had called her into his office. He was searching through all the drawers of his desk.

"Never can find a dad-blamed thing around here, Linda. I was looking for this here form letter 47B, you know the one? That says an employee is fired."

"Look, Tony, I know a few of my accounts dried up, but -"

"Here it is." He handed her the form letter. "You're fired, Linda."

"It doesn't seem fair. I mean, I'm not the only one."

"Lordy, don't I know? I gotta fire everybody. Only a matter of time before I gotta fire me. Ain't it the shinnola, though? Whole darn industry is drying up. Roller derbies, circuses, ice shows, faith healers, carnivals, wrestling - nobody takes nothing serious no more."

"Nobody cares."

"Nobody cares about nothing. If we fixed up to have the President jump a motorcycle over the Capitol building, we might just sell enough tickets to pay for the gas." He began searching through desk drawers again. "Nobody wants to take their kids nowhere no more."

"Maybe it's the kids," she suggested. "They're different these days. They make their own fun. They go off by themselves more, and - but couldn't it be just a fad? And when they get tired of it -"

"We can't run a whole industry on hope. The circus tigers need meat, the cowboys need beans, the wrestlers need Reichian analysis. Nope, kid, this is it. The organised leisure industry is a dead yak." Tony Murth found what he was looking for, a child's pacifier, and popped it between his lips. "There! Helpsh me shtop shnoking."

"But if the kids ever -"

"Kids these days," he murmured, a far-away look in his eyes. "Who understands 'em?"

"That's no argument. People always said that."

"True. True." She waited for more, but Tony Murth merely sat quietly, his eyes unfocused, his mouth now and then twitching at the pacifier.

Unemployment had agreed with Mommy Mason,

however. She was a slim, suntanned woman of thirty, with short cropped blonde hair and a smile only slightly marred by her new braces. She wore a striped polo shirt and bib overalls, embroidered on the bib with a popular television dog, Mister Fuzzle. Her sneakers were going to pieces.

Unemployment seemed to agree with Daddy Mason too. He was a lean, suntanned man of thirty, with short cropped dark hair and a smile only slightly marred by a missing incisor. He wore cut-down jeans, a striped T-shirt and running shoes. There was a scab on his knee that he couldn't help picking.

In the old ballgame, he had been a video editor for an educational production company. Education, as usual, meant puppets.

One afternoon his boss, Nora Volens, had called him into her office.

"Nick, you've been doing nice work for us."

"Sounds like you're getting ready to can me, ha ha."

"Ha ha, well not exactly, Nick."

"Ha, not exactly? Nora, what does that mean?"

"The whole company's folding. We're all out of a job."

"Gumdrops!" he exclaimed. "What the sam hill is going on, Nora?"

She began fiddling with the stuffed animal on her desk, a replica of the company's most popular TV puppet, Mister Fuzzle. "Nobody seems to know why, but educational TV is finished. Maybe the kids are going out to play more sandlot ball or something, maybe — maybe the nature of education is changing. Who knows."

"Yeah but that's no answer. Who ever knew?"

She picked up the doll and hugged it. "Anyway, Mister Fuzzle will always have a home with me."

The whole new ballgame began.

Mommy took a swig of chocolate milk and then tried blowing across the top of the bottle to produce a low, melancholy note. Daddy had put out the cigar by rubbing it against the window screen. Now he sat picking at his scab.

"I watched the six o'clock news," she said. "They said the word 'kids' is going out of style in the East. They said it's pejorative, it's parentalist."

"I can see that. But they call us —"

"The younger people now prefer to be called 'junior citizens', and I guess that name is catching on. In the East."

"Criminilty," he said. "They get to call us all kinds of names, if you're unemployed they call you a —"

An even lower note from the bottle. "With sixty per cent hardcore unemployment, you expect them to look up to us?"

"It's as if they were aliens," he said. "Aliens, posing as our children just long enough to take over. I don't know, the world supply of niacin, thiamine and riboflavin."

"Stop picking that scab. How would these aliens get here?"

"Who knows? Flying saucers, funny rays, an invisible gas, the point is, they're just like the aliens in movies — they never want to have any fun."

"Interesting theory," she said. "But hey, if you don't stop picking at that scab, your knee'll get all infected, all pus and blood poisoning. Cripes, they'll probably

have to cut your whole leg off!"

"I don't care."

"Gee you're dumb!"

"I am not!"

The argument was interrupted by something rattling against the screen. Mommy went to look out, as more gravel twanged against the wire mesh. Down below, in the streetlight filtering down through a sycamore, she could make out two figures. One wore a hat with mouse ears.

"It's Mommy and Daddy Green," she said, and called down to them in a stage whisper. "Hey you guys, what's happening?"

"Nothing, we're just messing around. Can you get out?"

"Now, we gotta stay in all week, on account of we didn't do our homework. Our job retraining stuff."

"Don't be a dope, you can just tie some sheets together or something and slide down. Come on, hey."

Daddy Mason said, "I don't know —" But Mommy was already tying sheets in a square knot, which is stronger, boy, than any knot you can name.

She slid down first. When Daddy Mason followed, he fell and bumped his elbow. He rolled around on the damp grass for a minute, crying, until the others called him a big baby. Then he jumped up and hit Daddy Green in the back.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!" The two men locked arms and wrestled for a minute.

"Come on," said Mommy Green to Mommy Mason. "Let's us just ignore these very immature dumb dopes."

They linked arms and walked on until the men came puffing along, now and then trying to shove or trip one another. Before they'd gone another block, a prowl car pulled up and shone its light on them. They heard the power hum of a bullhorn.

"Where are you going, gumdrops?" asked a shrill voice.

"The root beer stand, uh, sir."

"Do your children know where you are?"

"Sure they do."

The light flashed on each of their faces in turn. The voice finally said, "Okay. But remember, there's a curfew." Whoever or whatever was in charge of the car never emerged from behind the black windows at all — just turned off its bullhorn and light and drove away.

The root beer stand, thought Daddy Mason, what a comedown. Time was when they'd have gone to a real bar. But now even people who had the money for real liquor didn't want to drink. Everybody was dieting or else in training or else allergic to smoke. Some didn't like the taste of booze and some couldn't afford it. Anyway, as everybody knew, the bars were all full of very immature people.

The old root beer stand just seemed the natural place to hang out now. A frosty mug of root beer only cost a nickel, and you could hang out all evening, just fooling around. There were yellow fluorescent tubes along the eaves of the ramshackle old place, and June bugs were always zooming in on these to crash against the weathered clapboard. You could sit at a shadowy, rough old picnic table and slap mosquitoes and listen to crickets and watch the moths and June bugs. In the

summer night, you were in a world of insects.

Tonight there were lots of other gumdrops here: some on their way home from swimming, their suits rolled up in soggy towels and their wet hair slicked back. Some on bikes or roller skates, moving and weaving among the tables.

Tonight was different. People seemed excited for no good reason. There was plenty of noise, shouting and laughing. Some of the Daddies bellowed at each other, pounded their chests and yodelled. Some of the Mommys kept getting the giggles.

Daddy Taylor, a big man wearing a beanie covered with buttons and bottle caps, was the cause of it all. As soon as the Masons and Greens sat down with their root beer, he lurched over and poured something into it out of a square bottle.

"Hey is that booze? 'Cause I don't drink, see, I —" Daddy Mason began.

"You drink with me," said Daddy Taylor. He was big and in good condition. Everybody drank with him. "At's it," he said, waving the bottle. "Plenty more where this comes from. Pu-lenty. And —" He staggered away without finding a finish to the thought. After a couple of drinks, they no longer minded his bullying.

"Kids," said Daddy Green. "Who understands 'em? My kids, my own kids are like —"

"Like aliens," said Daddy Mason. "I know."

"Like robots, I was gonna say. Like gosh-darned robots!"

"Or aliens."

"Like gosh-darned robots, like machines, they don't

ever have any fun. They don't know what fun is. They go to school. Then they go to their after-school jobs. Then they come home, eat —"

"Robots don't eat, hey. But aliens —"

"Shut up, will you? Whose kids are they, anyway?"

"Yeah, but aliens might —"

"Just shut up. They eat, then they do their homework, fool around with the computer or just read, now and then go to scout meetings. Then they brush their teeth and go to bed. Just like robots, like —"

"Or aliens."

A woman spoke up. "I don't think there's anything wrong with the children. I think it's us, there's something wrong with us. I mean just look at us, the way we —" The rest was lost in booing and shouting, until Daddy Taylor told them all to shut their faces.

"Criminy!" he boomed. "We all got a right to speak our piece here. Heck, that's the whole point, I didn't bring a case of gin down here just to make everybody sick. Heck, I know — we all know — something is sure wrong somewhere, us gumdrops are getting a raw deal. Right? So if we all speak our piece, maybe — I don't know, maybe —"

Mommy Mason said, "I don't think the kids are aliens or robots, but I don't think it's us, either. It's — I don't know, the kids are like, like zombies. I mean, they're still our kids, but they just — I don't know."

"We're the zombies," said the woman who'd spoken before. "We're the ones turning into bodies without



heads, we're the damned zombies!"

"Hey, she swore! She cussed!" someone shouted over the general uproar. Mommies and Daddies were jumping up and shouting swear words all over the place.

Daddy Mason felt someone slip something into his hand. It was a note. He opened it under the table, where there was just enough light to make it out.

I THINK YR KIND A CUTE!!

He looked up and saw Mommy Green smiling at him. She winked. He tried winking back, but the other eye kept closing too.

Daddy Taylor pounded his mug on the table. "Okay, you guys, we all agree there's something wrong with the kids or with us or with everybody. You wanta hear what I think? I think the machines are taking over, using the kids to run everything. The kids and the computers are working together to - to make slaves out of us!"

"Yeah but hey -"

"They boss us every minute of the god-durn day! We have to take out the trash, and wash the dishes, and do everything they say, or we don't get our allowances. Am I right? Am I right?"

There was a hearty cheer, then applause, whistles.

"You all know I'm right. So what are we gonna do? Are we gonna sit around and let them take over our world? Or are we gonna fight! fight! fight!"

People were jumping up and down on the tables. A man in a propeller beanie waved a revolver in the air. "I got my piece!" he bellowed, his props spinning wildly. "You all get yours! Let's fight! Let's fight! Let's fight! Let's fight!"

"Fight who?" Daddy Mason murmured, unable to hear his own voice in the noise. He felt awful, his head spinning so that he couldn't do the one thing he wanted to do, which was to remember Mommy Green's first name.

"All right, gumdrops, break it up. Curfew time," said a shrill, amplified voice. The prowl car played its light over them like a cold hose, and for a moment it seemed as if they would slink away, sobered and scared.

Then someone threw a rock. "Fight! Fight! Fight!" People were rushing forward, and Daddy Mason found his rubbery legs carrying him forward too. Everyone got hold of the sleek dark car and pulled and pushed until it started rocking. The spotlight twisted back and forth uselessly until someone smashed it with a rock. Then, without a further word of protest, the prowl car went over.

"Wahoo!"

Everything else was a blur. He ran through strange, dark streets on his rubbery legs, and other gumdrops ran with him. Where to? Wahoo!

Mommy Mason at first stuck close to the big guy, Daddy Taylor, the only one who seemed to know what was going on. He also knew the guy who turned up with a big box of weapons and was passing them out: pistols, rifles, shotguns, bayonets, knives and axes, baseball bats. If there was going to be that kind of trouble, she wanted a weapon of her own. She chose a revolver, examined it, and started to give it back.

"This is only a starting pistol."

Daddy Taylor grinned. "They all are, but keep it. The enemy won't know you're firing blanks."

The man with the propeller beanie looked apologetic. "All our stuff is junk, not much ammo. What we shoulda had was machine guns, grenades, mines, rockets. Even a Colt .45 automatic, boy with that you can knock anybody right on their behind!"

Mommy Mason found she was dizzy, so she leaned against Daddy Taylor's muscles. "I hope nobody minds my asking, but just who the hell are we supposed to be shooting at? I mean so far all I heard was about kids and computers - you wanta go shooting little kids? No, I thought not. So that leaves computers? You want me to fire blanks at a computer?"

Daddy Taylor seemed very annoyed. "Look, if we don't all stick together we don't get nowhere," he said, shoving her away. "If you don't wanta fight, you can do some reconnaissance, okay? We need people to look in some windows and find out what they're up to."

"Yeah," said the man with the propeller beanie. He pointed to a distant home. "That's my place, you could start there. Find out what my kids are doing."

The boom was firing her up to say something mightily sarcastic. Then she caught the look in the propeller man's eyes - frightened, pleading. She nodded and set off, jogging on wobbly legs. Within minutes she'd found a window.

She could see three kids facing one corner of the room, evidently watching the TV news. A boy and a girl around ten years old, and another boy about five. Their zombie-like, robot-like, alien faces took in everything without changing expression.

Mommy Mason could hear the sounds of crashing glass and shouting on the TV, which said: "...street where the rioters turned to looting. Things were more serious across the river, where a mob broke into the armoury and emerged with mines, rockets, grenades and guns. But don't be scared, kids. Things will settle down before morning, you'll see."

"But why?" asked one of the older kids. "The gumdrops have got everything they need or want. Why this?"

The TV said, "Well, Jimmy, that's a big question, and we'd all like a lot more answers here. It has to do with today's social structure and how it came about. You know we went into that before: How once there were grownups who did all the work and earned all the money and took care of the kids, remember? And then there was a lot of what we called family role slippage in the 1950s, wasn't there?"

One of the kids said, "Yeah, there was some kind of big war that split up a lot of families in funny ways. Kids were raising themselves more."

"That's right, Sally," said the TV. "Kids took after school jobs, they dated earlier. They were expected to imitate grownups. Grownups, meanwhile, were getting much more interested in what they called leisure activities, or playing. In the 1950s they went bowling, they went water skiing, they relaxed in bermuda shorts while listening to 45 rpm records of Perry Como. The idea was that leisure was for relaxing, resting from their labours."

"In the 1960s the grownups played with sex and drugs - we haven't gone into those yet, we'll discuss

them later - and music and pretty clothes to dress up in. Now they didn't want to relax, they wanted to be childlike and innocent.

"In the 1970s grownups wore kids' clothes, jumpsuits and running shoes, and they went hang-gliding and roller skating when they weren't reading comics or going to movies like Popeye and Superman. They worked very hard at being kids. All they had to do was lose their jobs. The 1980s and 1990s took care of that, through automation. Grownups gave up, they became gumdrops."

"It's not fair!" said the little boy.

"No, Billy, but it's nobody's fault, either. Until we can get gumdrops interested in adulthood, we'll just have to carry on ourselves. We computers and you junior citizens are in charge, for now."

Mommy Mason heard something in Jimmy's voice, when he said, "It's so hard. You get so tired sometimes..." She stared at the children, whose cheeks were wet. Imagine that, crying over a boring old bunch of history!

Daddy Mason found he was sitting in a funny little house. For some reason, Mommy Green was there, too. They sat on little chairs, staring out the window at the night sky. Somewhere a magazine had exploded, and there were rockets and tracers, bombs and flares, scribbles of light on the blackness.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"In our back yard, Nick. This is our playhouse. Like it?"

"Great." Janice, that was her name. "Great, Janice."

"I like you," she said, putting her hand on his bare knee.

"I like you too. Watch out for the scab."

"Oh." She took her hand away, but continued smiling at him. Daddy Mason wondered whether they ought to maybe kiss or something.

After a moment, they turned away from one another and stared at the fireworks outside. From time to time, there would be a brilliant flash of light or a loud bang, and Daddy Mason would say:

"Boy, somebody's in trouble!"

"Yes," she'd say. "Yeah." She peered hard into the darkness, the scribbles of light, as though trying to see these some written explanation of her feelings.

"If you keep scratching at a scab," Daddy Mason said, "you can get a lot of pus and blood poisoning."

John Sladek is the author of the recently published *Roderick at Random* (Granada), which completes the robotic bildungsroman begun with *Roderick*. His next novel, *Tik-Tok* (to be published this autumn by Gollancz) is an extremely black comedy about a homicidal robot.

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THE CAULDER REQUIEM

Alex Stewart

T minus 3 days, 7 hours, 42 minutes

The phone rang, tearing harshly through the silence of the night. Caulder reached for it, fumbling, and the receiver slithered through his fingers. He reeled it in by the cord.

"Oui. C'est Caulder."

A slash of moonlight fell across the bedroom; a few streets away, a dog began to howl. He listened quietly, hardly breathing, while his stomach contracted slowly in the dark.

"I'm coming in." He sat up, cradling the receiver. Simone stirred beside him as he swung his feet to the floor.

"Phil? What is it?"

"They've lost a can."

Her breath hissed inward in the darkness, as he reached for his shirt.

"Oh my God. Has it...?"

"Not yet." He stepped into his shoes. "But it's decaying fast."

"How long have you got?"

"Three or four days." He paused at the door, looking back. "I'll call you as soon as I can."

"All right."

"Bye love." He clattered down the stairs, and the front door slammed. Simone lay awake, hugging a pillow for the rest of the night, while the bed grew cold beside her.

T minus 47 years, 3 months, 7 days, 11 hours, 36 minutes

"Phillip!"

He looked up, sighing. His mother was crossing the paddock, a dark silhouette against the house lights.

"Phillip! It's way past your bedtime!"

He pretended not to hear, absorbed in the harvest moon, hanging distended against the stars. His lips moved as he traced the markings. The Sea of Clouds, the Ocean of Storms, the Bay of Rainbows... The Sea

of Tranquillity... "The Eagle has landed...."

"Phillip!"

He started.

"Come on in this instant!"

"Oh Mum! Just five more minutes? Please?"

His mother sighed.

"Don't be difficult, Phillip. You know we've got people coming."

"But I can see Venus! Look!"

She sighed again, and peered through the telescope. A pale, shining crescent, floating alone in the infinite dark.

"It's very nice. Now be a good boy and come in."

"But I want to look at Venus!"

"It'll still be there tomorrow. You can look at it then."

"I suppose so." Sulkily he gathered up his belongings. Then he stopped, looking up at the stars. They wheeled above his head, untouchable, indifferent, and glorious.

"One day," he said, "I'm going to be a spaceman."

T minus 3 days, 4 hours, 26 minutes

The conference room was filling fast, grim-faced men and women talking rapidly in groups. Most of them were rumpled and sleepy, waiting desperately for the coffee to work. The Director, tall and gaunt, beckoned to Caulder as he stepped through the door.

"Phil! How's it going?"

Caulder shook his head.

"It's somewhere in the firing circuits. The kick motor didn't kick, that's all. We're still looking for the fault."

"Well I hope to God you find it." The Director turned, introducing his companion. "This is Paul Skarren, Phil. NASA liaison."

They shook hands, smiling sheepishly.

"You're the new man, aren't you?"

Skarren nodded.

"That's right. I'm taking over from Devlin."

"We'll miss him. Everyone liked Mark."

The Director rapped the table with his knuckles. The hum of conversation died, replaced by a scraping of chairs. He coughed.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm sorry to call you in at such an ungodly hour, but, as some of you already know, we have a problem."

Skarren leaned towards Caulder.

"What's he saying? My French isn't any too good."

"He's just filling them in." Caulder smiled sympathetically. "Don't worry. You'll pick it up."

The Director leaned against the table, resting his weight on his palms.

"Mr Skarren has the American side of all this. Mr Skarren?"

Caulder nudged him.

"You're on. English will do."

Skarren climbed reluctantly to his feet, and hesitated. "So far as we know, the launch was perfect. But the can failed to make the right orbit." He licked his lips.

"It's too low for a tug to pick up, and too large for a shuttle. A missile strike's out of the question." Several people nodded. "And it's coming down. In three and a half days, it starts to burn." His eyes flickered round the table, meeting the faces. Some shocked, some impassive. "So." He tried to force a grin. "Any suggestions?"

T minus 33 years, 4 months, 7 days, 9 hours, 17 minutes

"Astronautics? What on earth for?"

"Because I want to. Does there have to be a reason?" He turned away from the window. Outside the hall, the campus was basking in a final spasm of autumn sun. Most of his friends were lying on the grass, or throwing bread at the ducks on the lake. Andrea pouted, sprawling on her unmade bed.

"But what can you do with it? Honestly, Phil, you never bother to think things through."

"And you do, I suppose." He hefted one of her textbooks. *Comparative Economics - Theory and Practice*. "So what would you suggest?"

"Cybernetics. Or control engineering." She fiddled with her crucifix. She always wore it, even in bed. "With all the new power stations coming in, Daddy says..."

"I know what Daddy says. Space is a waste of time. No money in it."

"That's not fair!" She sat up, glaring at him.

"Sorry. No money for engineering graduates in it."

"Why are you always so rude about him? He likes you, Phil, he does really."

"No he doesn't. He just hides it well." Caulder shook his head.

"You never give him a chance!"

"He never gives me one." He turned back to the window. "Our values are different, that's all."

"You're impossible!" She threw the pillow at him.

"All right then, take astronautics. See what good it does you."

T minus 2 days, 11 hours, 53 minutes

"That's it, then." Caulder laid the sheaf of papers gently on the Director's desk. "We can't clear it from the ground."

"You're sure of that?" The Director looked up at him, his face skeletal. He fumbled a tablet into his mouth. Caulder nodded.

"Absolutely."

"So what can we do?"

Caulder shrugged.

"Pray a little?"

T minus 30 years, 8 months, 3 days, 7 hours, 21 minutes

"Are you out of your mind?" Andrea stormed through the tiny flat. "After all the trouble he's gone to, found you a really good job..."

"I've gone out and got one on my own. On my own merit, too. He'll probably have a stroke on the spot." Caulder vanished into the bedroom.

"What do you expect us to live on, for God's sake?"

"My salary." He'd taken a suitcase from the wardrobe, and started to pack his underwear. Andrea stood, red-faced, in the doorway, glaring at him.

"I can't live on that!"

"I can." Shirts, shaver, toothbrush.

"Well that's just typical of you. Self, self, self. Why don't you think about me for a change?"

He glanced up.

"I did. All the way back from Paris." He carried on packing.

"And?"

"I'm taking the job."

"Oh are you? Well listen to me, Phil. If you go to Paris, I'm not going with you. And you needn't ever bother coming back!"

"I thought you'd say that." He snapped the case closed, and smiled at her. "Lucky I only got the one ticket, isn't it?"

T minus 2 days, 7 hours, 32 minutes

"Can I come in?"

Caulder looked up, through the steam of his coffee cup. Skarren was leaning round the door of his office.

"Of course. Sit down. Coffee in the pot."

"Thanks." Skarren pushed a handful of papers aside, making room for his cup. He hesitated for a moment, and leaned forward across the desk.

"Listen, Phil, I think you should know. Jerry just called from Washington. Strictly unofficial."

"Sounds serious."

"It is. SAC have been asking for figures. Like for an intercept."

"What?" Caulder knocked his cup over, drowning the desk. "They can't be..."

"They are."

"But the fallout!"

Skarren shrugged.

"They say it'll happen anyway."

"Not across half the bloody hemisphere!"

"I know. Jerry's trying to stall them. But unless we come up with something soon, they're going to try it." He glanced at the stained and soggy papers. "What are you working on, anyway?"

"Just an idea." Caulder yawned, and refilled the cup. "Take a look. See what you think."

T minus 30 years, 8 months, 1 day, 16 hours, 52 minutes

"Delighted to see you again, Mr Caulder." The Director

shook his hand firmly. Caulder looked down at his bald patch. With his full-moon face, the little German reminded him of Friar Tuck.

"I'm delighted to be back."

"And looking forward to getting started. I've no doubt." He leaned over, and pressed the buzzer on his desk. "I've asked someone to show you around."

The door opened behind him. Caulder turned.

"Mam'selle Serrault. Simone, this is Phillip Caulder."

T minus 2 days, 4 hours, 23 minutes

"M'sieur Laure?" Skarren's voice was hushed. The Director looked up, slowly.

"What is it?" His voice was low, and slurred with fatigue. Caulder leaned forward.

"We think we've found an answer. It's a bit of a long shot, but..."

"Better than no shot at all, right?" Skarren took the papers, and laid them on the desk. "There's a Hermes on the pad at Kourou, isn't there?"

The Director nodded.

"I held the countdown. In case we could use it."

"We can. Phil's team has the TT all ready for us."

The Director picked up the papers.

"Making a rendezvous isn't the problem. What does it do when it gets there?" He looked up at Caulder.

"Puts a man aboard. We've found the fault now. I think we can fix it."

The Director shook his head.

"I don't like it. Are these timings accurate?" Caulder nodded. "Then forget it. It's suicide."

"It's cutting it a bit fine. I'll admit..."

"Fine? He'd have twenty minutes at the most."

"Before it starts to break up. And you know what happens then." Skarren leaned on the desk. "What choice have we got?"

T minus 22 years, 7 months, 3 days, 5 hours, 18 minutes

"You heard, then?" He looked up, as Simone slid into the booth beside him. She nodded.

"I'm sorry, Phil. I know how much it meant to you."

"That's the way it goes." He shrugged, toying with his empty glass. She squeezed his hand.

"You'll get other chances. You'll see."

"No I won't." He shook his head. "I saw the medical report."

"What did it say?"

"Suppose I had an attack up there. Or words to that effect." He forced a smile. "Isn't this supposed to be our anniversary?"

"It was the last time I looked."

"Well we're not paying all that money for a babysitter, just to sit here and feel miserable, are we?"

"Definitely not."

"Right then. Let's go."

They rose, and made for the door. Outside the dusk was fading, and the moon balanced gently on the rooftops. Caulder stared at it, and sighed.

"So close, Simone. I got so close."

T minus 2 days, 2 hours, 46 minutes

"What do you mean it's impossible?" Caulder twisted back from the window. "Even I could do it!"

"I know." The Director slipped another tablet into

his mouth. "But not fast enough. It took thirty-three minutes in the tank."

"Thirty-three minutes!" Caulder was pacing the room. "That's ridiculous!"

"But it's what it took. I'm sorry, Phil. It was a good idea."

Caulder sat on the desk.

"Let me try, Raoul. I've been in the tank before, and I know the system inside out."

The Director nodded.

"Why not?" He reached for the phone. "At least you know what corners we can cut."

T minus 14 years, 6 months, 9 hours, 37 minutes

"Daddy! You're late!" She shook a finger at him, and tried to look angry. "And on my birthday, too!"

Caulder smiled, and ruffled her hair.

"Sorry love. I got stuck at the office."

"That's no excuse."

"And then I had to go and pick something up."

"What? Where is it? Can I see?"

"When we get back..."

"Jenny!" Simone leaned over the bannister. "Is that... Oh good. Better hurry, Phil, or we'll be late for the curtain."

"Five minutes." He bounded up the stairs. "Where's Philippe?"

"In his room. He's sure he can tie his own laces."

Jenny giggled.

"He's been trying for half an hour already."

"Then you'd better go and help him. Go on." Her mother propelled her down the corridor, and returned to the bedroom.

"You could have made the effort, Phil. Just this once."

"I tried, honestly. Henderson wanted a word, that's all."

"Who?"

The new director. He wanted me to take over his old team."

"Phil! That's wonderful!" She kissed him. "Doing what?"

"A new project. Working with the Americans." He slipped into his jacket, and reached for a comb. "Nuclear waste disposal."

T minus 1 day, 22 hours, 37 minutes

"Twenty-one minutes, seven seconds." The voice echoed eerily in his helmet. Caulder trod water for a moment, then struck out for the surface. "It's an improvement, Phil, but it's still not good enough. I'm sorry."

He broke the surface, floundering, as the waterlogged pressure suit began dragging him down. Then the divers had his arms, and steered him to the side of the tank. Eager hands dragged him ashore, and removed the helmet.

"It's near enough, Raoul."

The Director shook his head.

"It's over the limit. Way over."

"Of course it is. I'm not trained for this. Get an astronaut..."

"We used one before. He did it exactly the same way as you."

"But he took thirty-three minutes!"

"You know the system better."

"Then I'll have to go."

"No! It's out of the question."

Caulder stood, clumsy in the pressure suit, leaning on Skarren for support.

"Paul. You tell him."

Skarren nodded.

"Phil's right. It's a fighting chance."

"It's suicide! He's untrained...."

"We'll keep an eye on the time. He can always get back to the ship if it runs out on him."

The Director shook his head.

"You'll die if you try it."

"Thousands could die if I don't," Caulder smiled.

"Raoul. Please. I like sleeping at night."

T minus 11 years, 1 month, 2 days, 18 hours, 12 minutes

"Of course it isn't dull!" Jenny leaned across the table, fizzing with adolescent enthusiasm. "The project's good for half the mark, so it's got to be something really exciting." The sun filled the old kitchen, striking highlights from her hair. Clair de Lune floated gently down the hall; Phillipe was getting tired of playing scales. Caulder laughed.

"All right. What do you want to know?"

She bit her lip.

"Well, I know the basic principle. What happens to the cans once they reach orbit?"

"One of the platforms sends out a SEP stage. They dock automatically."

"Where do they go?"

"About halfway to Venus. Then they leave them in solar orbit, like asteroids."

"Clever. Can you get me some diagrams and things?"

"I don't see why not." Caulder leaned back in his chair, enjoying the music. "He's getting pretty good, isn't he?"

T minus 1 day, 18 hours, 7 minutes

Simone lifted the phone on the second ring.

"Phil?"

"Hello love. How are you?"

"All right. How's it going?"

"We think we've found the answer."

"Thank God."

"Amen. The snag is, I've got to fly out to Kourou and work from there."

"I'll pack you a case."

"Sorry love, there isn't time. I'm going straight to the airfield."

"Oh."

"I just wanted to talk to you. Before I go."

"I'm glad. I..."

"Hell, they're here already. Bye love." Click.

"Au'voir." She replaced the receiver, wondering vaguely why her face was wet.

T minus 19 hours, 23 minutes

The sun clawed at his eyes as soon as he left the shade of the aircraft. The forest had crawled to the very edge of the field, engulfing the complex. Pads and ancillaries stood out clearly from the air, in splendid isolation, like pebbles in a pond. The larger buildings were half overgrown, sinking into the jungle like Hollywood temples. Thin threads of concrete stitched

them together, linked them to the wider world.

He raised a hand to his eyes. A solitary jeep was racing down the runway.

Nothing else moved. The thick, steaming air was ripe with the smell of kerosene, rotting wood, and baking metal.

Dazzle stabbed his eyes as he turned his head; a thin, silver needle, impossibly fragile, growing up out of the forest. Pad four, Journey's end.

The jeep slowed to a halt beside him. The once-white bodywork was spattered with mud, obscuring the agency logo.

"You're the passenger, right?" The driver was young and cheerful, his shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow. Caulder nodded.

"Any baggage?"

"No."

The driver looked vaguely surprised, and extended a hand as Caulder clambered in.

"I'm Markham, by the way. Tony Markham. DLC."

He gunned the engine, and swung the little vehicle through a gap in the undergrowth. A broad, well-paved road appeared, carrying them smoothly into the heart of the complex.

"Is everything set?"

Markham nodded.

"Countdown's going well. We had a ten-minute hold a few hours back, but they've made it up somehow. Just don't tell the pilot, OK?"

"Why not?"

"They worry enough as it is."

The jeep swung into a sliproad.

"That reminds me. Who is the pilot?"

"I don't know. Hang on." Markham reached under the dashboard, steering one-handed through a series of bends. He pulled out a clipboard, and glanced at it.

"Duty crew roster. Just a sec." He ran an eye down the column. "Here we are, one four, Genevieve Caulder. Relative of yours?"

T minus 3 minutes

"CRS up and running, check." Jenny flicked a couple of switches, and the lights danced obedient before her eyes. "TCR green, all systems nominal, check. Copy?"

She listened for a moment, then turned to smile at her father.

"So. You finally made it."

He nodded, fidgeting in his seat.

"I never knew the suits were so itchy."

"You got used to it." She listened to the voice in her headset. "Confirm, I copy that. Laid in and set." She checked her instruments again. "How's my baby brother these days?"

"Fine. Doing very well. He's scoring the new Riffard film."

"I suppose we'll have to go and see it, then." She made a few final checks. Caulder shifted in his seat.

"Jenny. Did you...?"

"Pull strings to be here?" He nodded. "No. One four's mine, hold or no hold."

He laughed, and glanced at the timer - it couldn't be right, it read zero already - and the pressure flowed across him. He never knew for sure, but through the pounding of his blood, and the muffled, faraway roar, he thought he could hear her say "But I would have done."

T plus 1 hour, 47 minutes

"Be careful, Dad." Jenny's voice echoed loud inside his helmet. Caulder ignored it, and squeezed the controls. His EMU fired, and he began a long, slow tumble to the left.

"Don't worry. I've done this dozens of times in the tank."

"It's not the same."

She was right, of course. In the tank he could still take Up and Down for granted. And the Earth wasn't there, so beautiful and so fragile, filling half his horizon.

"Nineteen and a half minutes."

It couldn't be! He checked his watch, and sighed with relief. She was leaving a wide margin for safety. He gripped the controls again, and accelerated towards the can.

"It looks undamaged from here. Tumbling a bit, though."

"Atmospheric friction. Better get a move on."

He reached out, snagging a stanchion. A faint jerk, and he was with it.

"I've boarded."

"Eighteen minutes to go."

"I know what the bloody time is!" He regretted it at once: not for Jenny, who knew he didn't mean it, but for the listening hundreds at Darmstadt.

"The hatch won't come. It must have warped." He dug in his pouch for a screwdriver, inserting the blade between the plates. The hatch sprang free, and whirled away towards the Earth. He looked up briefly to follow it. The Hermes hung below him, a few metres away. Jenny was watching him from the flight deck. He waved, and turned back to the circuits.

"It's burned out!"

"Phil!" The Director's voice, heavy with static. "Can you still fix it?"

"I think so. I'll have to bypass."

"There isn't time." Jenny cut in, clear and distinct. "You've got fourteen minutes left."

"That should be enough." He took out some wire, and a pair of cutters. "Now, let's see..."

He made the connections rapidly, twisting the bare ends of the wire together. So many to go. He glanced at his watch. Eight minutes. His fingers, clumsy in the heavy gloves, trembled with impatience.

"Five minutes, Dad."

"All right!" He was sweating heavily. The last pair...

"No good, Phil." Skarren's voice. "Still a no-go here."

"Damn it! Wait..." He checked the connections. Some of the joints, made in haste, were loose. "I think I've got it..."

"Two minutes..."

"For Christ's sake, Jenny, shut up!" He twisted the

wires together. "Try it now."

"Dad! Leave it! Your time's up!"

"Still a no-go, Phil."

"Dad! You've got to come back! Now!"

"Just a minute!"

"You haven't got a minute! It'll break up any second!" She was already pulling the Hermes up, angling the nose for re-entry. The can began to shake.

"Got it!" He made the final connection.

"Phil! It's cleared! Now get the hell out!"

"How long have we got?"

"Firing in one minute."

"It won't hold together that long." He untwisted some of the joints he'd made, and cross-connected them

"Phil! What..."

He stared at the final pair of wires, held loosely in his hand. Then slowly he twisted them together.

"Dad! No!"

The motor fired. The glare punched through his eyelids, before the visor had a chance to polarise. Then the shuddering stopped, replaced by a slow, steady pressure.

He opened his eyes. Below him the Hermes glowed, a dull, sullen red, as it started its dive through the clean winds of Earth. His radio crackled.

"Jenny, Can you hear me?"

"Just about." The wash of static grew steadily, even as he listened. "Goodbye, Dad."

"Goodbye, darling. I love you all..."

Silence. She'd entered the blind spot.

T plus 2 hours, 29 minutes

The tide of static finally receded

"Hermes one four, laid in for threshold. Trajectory nominal, copy?"

Jenny ignored it, frantically searching the wavebands. She found it at last, a brief, fading echo.

"Finally made it..."

She smiled then, and understood.

T plus 1 year, 5 months, 4 days, 11 hours, 32 minutes

"So what did you think of the Caulder piece?"

"The requiem?" The critic shrugged, and reached for his lighter. "All right, I suppose. Nothing special."

Alex Stewart's first story appeared in Interzone 2. This is his second.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

New stories by **Richard Cowper, John Crowley, M. John Harrison, John Shirley** and others.

ON THE DECK OF THE FLYING BOMB

DAVID REDD

First Evening

As a stowaway, hidden like an unseen parasite, I can use the lifeboat cameras to observe the workings of the Flying Bomb and its crew. My lifeboat is one bead in the necklace of three hundred lifeboats strung along the rim of the upper deck: no inquiring crewman will think to examine my little hermit cell until I lift it from the deck and glide away. This is a strange behemoth that I shall be leaving; a creature so vast that on its deck there is no sensation of motion. The Flying Bomb is four miles long and two miles wide, and its curving underbelly is over a mile deep. On its upper deck the buildings form a large town where the crewmen live and work. On the lower deck the maintenance staff move like pale ants in caverns, tending the machines which keep this artificial world airborne. And further below is the unstable cargo which will explode novalike when the Flying Bomb reaches its target.

I shall reconnoitre through the nearby buildings like an enemy spy – not that I am an enemy – and through my espionage learn the best moment to escape. The lifeboat supplies include several one-size uniforms, so I can imitate the chameleon and change my disguise to suit my surroundings. However, on this first day exploration in person would be too dangerous. I have studied the deck through the monitors. These well-spent hours have rewarded me with a full knowledge of the nearer buildings – the sick bay, kitchens, dormitories and married quarters, recreation rooms, chaplain's cabin, and so on. Tomorrow, armed with this knowledge, I shall venture out.

Second Evening

Today I learned the location of the bridge, the nerve centre from which information and commands radiate to all parts of the Flying Bomb. Emerging from my lifeboat, I walked through a sector appropriate to the hour and to the uniform I wore. The buildings were like holiday chalets, with timber panels and shining windows in standard metal frames. The brown decking planks were solid under my boots: the polished sun-darkened bones of an entire forest.

Crewmen passed me about their business, or came to life momentarily behind windows, but they did not query my presence. One man seen in the lifeboat would have demanded attention: one man seen in the crowd was nothing. I followed an unsuspecting officer who might lead me to the bridge, but he entered a restricted zone and only my careful researches of yesterday saved me. Turning away, I wondered how the crewmen could avoid the myriad pitfalls inevitable in so complex an organisation. In my journey I had passed signs, notices, training halls, even a squad on a shed construction exercise, but although I had seen these things I had learned nothing. My learning began when I watched a private take something from a wall dispenser labelled INFORMATION. I followed him and picked up three colourful booklets. An adjacent poster reminded me: DO YOUR DUTY THE PENALTIES ARE SEVERE. I retreated.

In the sanctuary of a nearby recreation room I examined the booklets, LOCATION ORGANISATION PROCEDURE. So this was how each crewman of the Flying Bomb was kept fully aware of his part in the system. All men had

to keep themselves informed of their rights and restrictions: failure was punished by loss of benefits or worse. These booklets gave me a complete knowledge of the basic organisation. Every crewman, however newly recruited, was given the same knowledge, and theoretically could make himself master of the Flying Bomb.

By studying these guides I have prepared my route towards the bridge, the captain and the navigational data I require. I am amazed that this information is freely available. Most amazing of all, the booklets describe the Enemy which the Flying Bomb will destroy.

Third Evening

Today I gained admission to the bridge. At first I roamed the adjoining corridors as a waiter, bearing beakers of coffee from one room to another. In this role I watched the rituals of relationship among the superior officers, and I memorised their undocumented gestures and procedures until I could mimic the symbols of power. In an empty washroom I became a lieutenant.

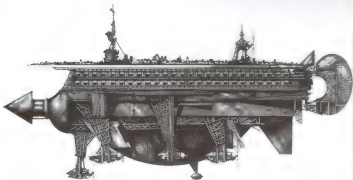
On this stage there were set formulae for entrances and exits, the cues which I had to learn. I found a lecture theatre opposite the bridge, and by joining some officers for a training session I obtained a window seat overlooking the glass-sided central control room. While the other students took notes on the control of subordinates, I took notes on the bridge and its inhabitants. The navigating officers were extremely busy. During the session I also studied the lecturer and officers: they appeared unconcerned about their appro-

aching doom when the Flying Bomb will destroy itself and its target. Perhaps they too were actors.

The lecture, on projection of authority, aided my entry to the bridge. Outside the hall I noticed a private at the door of the bridge, struggling to trigger the door release while holding six coffee cups. I smiled and approached him like a true lieutenant, lifting three cups from his hands. "I'll take these, private. You open the door." He obeyed swiftly and gratefully. "Couldn't find a tray, sir." - "Next time, improvise something or make two trips." I followed him inside, my eyes busy as I set down the cups on the tabletop. The captain was instantly recognisable by his uniform and his authoritative bearing. Beyond him I saw two navigators at a display panel. But any delay here would arouse suspicion. "Remember what I told you, private." - "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." And though it hurt me to go I walked unhesitatingly out of the bridge. The incident had been excellent preparation for tomorrow.

I returned to my lifeboat via the lower deck: curiosity took me down to see the assembled power units, levitatory devices, and battle weapons. As usual the crewmen were working with apparent indifference to their final destiny: one group of maintenance men had invented a new coupling lubricator. I was not sure whether to pity or to admire their pointless endeavour. I then examined the cargo through a viewer, but the screen showed only more machinery, with camouflage nets and inspection ladders leading downwards. The cargo itself was hidden further below.

In all my travels I was unchallenged. My outward conformity ensured my acceptance.



Fourth Evening

The dream this morning upset me. I was in a metal coffin, floating within a greater emptiness beside me were two human skulls shining in the darkness, one still wearing ancient earphones. I ached with sympathy for these lost creatures, but I could not help them. A voice whispered: "All dark past the terminator...what have they done?" Then I awoke. I would never help them now.

I walked to the bridge still depressed by the dream. With little hope of success I carried in some data sheets borrowed from the maintenance deck, and said that a manual check was required. To my surprise the officers were very helpful, even demonstrating the operation of the display units. "And if you want more checks any time, come in again."

The bridge was crowded, and I had no chance to obtain the co-ordinates. Nevertheless, my time was not wasted: I overheard an argument between the captain and a senior officer. The officer wanted the captain to inspect our cargo, which served as both payload and fuel. The captain refused: "It's safer left alone." — "It needs watching, but it's harmless in itself." — "Not when we're burning it up!" Listening to this, my previous admiration for the captain lessened swiftly. He was a slave to his orders. The flight was scheduled to take ten days: a slow journey, exposing the Flying Bomb to many outside dangers. Faster flight, to reduce these risks, would have increased the danger from the cargo. The captain mentioned this and said he was glad his orders had decided his flight pattern for him. I was sickened: a captain should make his own decisions. Even I, a stowaway, could do that. I was right in wishing to leave.

Taking the data sheets back to the lower deck, I said the next batch would need checking tomorrow. Those papers would be my passport to escape.

On the upper deck, a corporal stopped me: "Away from your post, private? Where are you going?" Confused, I indicated my lifeboat. "Just on my way back, sir!" — "Then jump to it! If I see you off limits again I'll report you!" I hurried away, thankful the encounter had gone no further. But why had the ambassador of Order questioned me? The booklets are silent.

Soon it will not matter. The Flying Bomb soars on, a shadow in the sunset, over plains of rippling wheat, through the smoke of burning cities, onward to its doom. I am a temporary resident, and will soon depart.

Fifth Afternoon

It began perfectly. I collected the papers, went up to the bridge, and spent the coffee break with the navigators. I obtained both our position and the route to safety. But while I was still on the bridge, the captain called us all to the main vision panel. "It's happened, men. We were afraid of this." I saw the image of a distant Flying Bomb, dark against the orange sky. "Collision course. We'll have to fight." While he alerted the crew, I raced back to my lifeboat. Inside, I sealed the hatch and began the separation sequence. I cut the external power supply: to my horror the internal power died also. I reversed the switch and power returned. I wept. The lifeboat drew its power from the Flying Bomb: its independent reserves were a sham. I could never leave.

But other than that, my escape went perfectly.

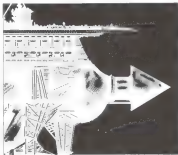
I am staying in the lifeboat: there is nothing else to do. On the monitors I watch the approaching enemy. It could be a mirage, an atmospheric reflection of our own Flying Bomb, except that I can see the weapons of its lower deck puffing smoke, and can feel the detonations of shells bursting against our hull.

The corporal just opened my hatch. "Don't you know your battle station? Get down and guard the payload!" He shouted his orders and disappeared. He is under the illusion that I am a member of the crew. I shall remain here and watch the battle until —

Corporal returns: "Get down there!"

I go.

David Redd sold his first *sf* stories in 1966, and has published regularly, if not prolifically, ever since. He lives with his family in west Wales.



continued from p.2

happen. *Sf* writers should be able to look outside the blinkered vision of everyday life and cast off the restrictive traditions of the genre. It is possible both to present the world's problems in a new light (as in the stories by John Sladek and Malcolm Edwards which appear in this issue) and to think just a little more clearly and intelligently about what the future might be like.

The film *Blade Runner* might not have been very true to Philip Dick but it did make a visual breakthrough by presenting a future city in which the towering buildings and bright lights of the new technology were mixed with the latitudes of the old. Of course that is what a future city will look like, and yet for years the *sf* tradition has dictated a future consisting solely of stainless steel walls and automatic sliding doors. Writers were simply copying other writers, rather than thinking things out for themselves. Go back to first principles — that is the key.

The publishing industry is partly to blame for *sf*'s neglect of the future. It is too slow. It might take a year for a writer to plan and write a novel, another year before it appears in hardback, and still another year before it appears in paperback and people can actually read it. At the rate the world is changing, that's too slow for *sf* fiction. This is where *Interzone* comes in. We can have our shaggy moments ourselves when it comes to reading manuscripts, but it is possible for us to write a story, today and see it in print here within six months. The study of the future is an important area of imaginative fiction. *Interzone* offers you a unique opportunity — a chance to write (and read) about the future before it happens.

Simon Oursley

AFTER-IMAGES

WILES-INVCE?

MALCOLM EDWARDS

After the events of the previous day Norton slept only fitfully, his dreams filled with grotesque images of Richard Carver, and he was grateful when his bedside clock showed him that it was nominally morning again. He always experienced difficulty sleeping in anything less than total darkness, so the unvarying sunlight, cutting through chinks in the curtains and striking across the floor, marking it with lines that might have been drawn by an incandescent knife, added to his restlessness. He had tried to draw the curtains as closely as possible, but they were cheap and of skimpy manufacture – a legacy from the previous owner of the flat, who for obvious reasons could not be bothered to take them with her when she moved – and even when, after much manoeuvring, they could be persuaded to meet along much of their length, narrow gaps would always appear at the top, near the pleating.

Norton felt gripped by a lassitude born of futility, but as on the eight other mornings of this unexpected coda to his existence, fought off the feeling and slid wearily out of bed. After dressing quickly and without much thought, he pulled back the curtains to admit the brightness of the early-afternoon summer sun.

The sun was exactly where it had been for the last eight days, poised a few degrees above the peaked roof of the terraced house across the road. It had been a stormy day, and a few minutes before everything had stopped a heavy shower had been sweeping across London; but the squall had passed and the sun had appeared – momentarily, one would have supposed – through a break in the cloud. The visible sky was still largely occupied by lowering, soot-coloured clouds, which enfolded the light and gave it the peculiar penetrating luminosity which presages a storm; but the sun sat in its patch of blue sky like an unblinking eye in the face of the heavens, and Norton and

the others spent their last days and nights in a malign parody of the mythical, eternally sunlit English summer.

Outside the heat was stale and oppressive and seemed to settle heavily in his temples. Drifts of rubbish, unattended now for several weeks, gave off a ripe odour of decay and attracted buzzing platoons of flies. Marlborough Street, where Norton lived, was one of a patchwork of late-Victorian and Edwardian terraces filling an unfashionable lacuna in the map of west London. At one end of the road was a slightly wider avenue which called itself a High Road on account of a bus route and a scattering of down-at-heel shops. Norton walked towards it, past houses which gave evidence of their owners' hasty departure, doors and windows left open. The house across the road, which for three days had been the scene of an increasingly wild party held by most of the few teenagers remaining in the area, was now silent again. They had probably collapsed from exhaustion, or drugs, or both, Norton thought.

At the corner Norton paused. To the north – his left – the street curved away sharply, lined on both sides by shabby three-storey houses with mock-Georgian facades. To the south it was straight, but about a hundred yards away was blocked off by the great baleful flickering wall of the interface, rising into the sky and curving back on itself like a surreal bubble. As always he was drawn to look at it, though his eyes resisted as if under autonomous control and tried to focus themselves elsewhere.

It was impossible to say precisely what it looked like, for its surface seemed to be an absence of colour. When he closed his eyes it left swimming variegated after-images: protoplasmic shapes which crossed and intermingled and blended. When Norton forced him-

self to stare at it, his optic nerves attempted to deny its presence, warping together the flanking images of shopfronts so that the road seemed to narrow to a point.

Norton suffered occasional migraine headaches and often experienced an analogous phenomenon as the prelude to an attack: he would find that parts of his field of vision had been excised, but that the edges of the blanks were somehow pulled together, so it was difficult to be sure something was missing. Just as then it was necessary sometimes to turn sideways and look obliquely to see an object sitting directly in front of him, so now, as he turned away, he could see the interface as a curving wall the colour of a bruise from which pinpricks of intense light occasionally escaped as if through faults in its fabric. Then, too, he could glimpse more clearly the three human images printed, as though by some sophisticated holographic process, upon the interface. In the centre of the road were the backs of Carver and himself as they disappeared beyond the interface, the images already starting to become fuzzy as the wavefront slowly advanced; to one side, slightly sharper, was the record of his lone re-emergence, his expression clearly pale and strained despite the heavy polarised goggles which covered half his face.

Norton had been sitting the previous morning at a table outside the Café Hellenika, slowly drinking a tiny cup of Greek coffee. He had little enthusiasm for the sweet, muddy drink, but was unwilling as yet to move on to beer or wine.

The café's Greek Cypriot proprietor had reacted to the changed conditions in a manner which under other circumstances would have seemed quite enterprising. He had shifted all his tables and chairs out on to the pavement, leaving the cooler interior free for the perennial pool players and creating outside a passable imitation of a street café remembered from happier days in Athens or Nicosia. Many of the remaining local residents were of Greek origin, and the men gathered here, playing cards and chess, drinking cheap Demetika, and talking in sharp bursts which sounded dramatic however banal and ordinary the conversation. There was a timelessness to the scene which Norton found oddly apposite.

He was staring into his coffee, thinking studiously about nothing, when a shadow fell across him and he simultaneously heard the chair next to his being scraped across the pavement. He looked up to see Carver easing himself into the seat. He was dressed bizarrely in a thickly padded white suit which looked as though it should belong to an astronaut or a polar explorer. He was carrying a pair of thick goggles which he placed on the formica surface of the table. He signalled the café owner to bring him a coffee.

Norton didn't want company, but he was intrigued despite himself. "What on Earth is that outfit?" he asked.

"Explorer's gear...bloody hot, too," said Carver, dragging the sleeve clumsily across his perspiring forehead.

"What's to explore, for God's sake?"

"The...whatever you call it. The bubble. The interface. I've been into it."

Norton felt irritated. Carver seemed incapable of

taking their situation seriously. He had attached himself to Norton four days ago as he sat getting drunk and had sought him out every day since, full of jokes of dubious merit and colourful stories of his life in some unspecified, but probably menial, branch of the diplomatic service. He was the sort of person Norton hated finding himself next to in a bar. Now he was obviously fantasizing.

"Don't be ridiculous. You'd be dead."

"Do I look dead?" Carver gestured at himself. His face, tanned and plump with eyes of a disconcertingly pure aquamarine, looked as healthy as ever.

"It's impossible," Norton repeated.

"Don't you want to know what I found?"

Losing patience, Norton shouted: "I know what you'd have found. You'd have found a fucking nuclear explosion. Don't tell me you went for a stroll through that!"

The café owner came up and slapped a cup on to the table in front of Carver, slopping the coffee into the saucer. Carver took a long slow sip of the dark liquid, looking at Norton expressionlessly over the rim of the cup as he did so. Norton subsided, feeling foolish.

"But I did, Norton," Carver finally said calmly. "I did."

Norton remained silent, stubbornly refusing to play his part in the chronography of the conversation, knowing that Carver would carry on without further prompting.

"I didn't just walk in," Carver said, after a few seconds. "I'm not suicidal. I tried probing first, with a stick. I wagged it about a bit, pulled it out. It wasn't damaged. That set me thinking. So I tried with a pet mouse of mine. No damage - except that its eyes were burned out, poor little sod. So I thought, all right, it's very bright, but nothing more. What does that suggest?"

Norton shrugged.

"It suggested to me that the whole process is slowed down in there, that there's a whole series of wavefronts - the light flash, the fireball, the blastwave - all expanding slowly, but all separate."

"It seems incredible."

"Well, the whole situation isn't precisely normal, you know -"

They were interrupted by a commotion at another table. There seemed to be some disagreement between two men over a hand of cards. One of them, a heavy-set middle-aged man wearing a greying string vest through which his bodily hair sprouted abundantly, was standing and waving a handful of cards. The other, an older man, remained seated, banging his fist repeatedly on the table. Their voices rose in a fast, threatening gabble. Then the man in the vest threw the cards across the table with a furious jerk of his arm and stamped into the café. The other continued to talk loudly and aggressively to the onlookers, his words augmented by a complex mime of gesture.

Norton was glad of the distraction. He couldn't understand what Carver was getting at, and wasn't sure he wanted to. "It's amazing the way they carry on," he said. "It's as though nothing had happened, as though everything was normal."

"Very sensible of them. At least they're consistent."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I am. The whole thing has been inevitable for years. We all knew that, but we tried to pretend

otherwise even while we carried on preparing for it. We said that it wouldn't happen, because so far it hadn't happened – some logic! We buried our heads like ostriches and pretended as hard as we could. Now it's here – it's just down the road and we can see it coming and we know there's no escape. But we knew that all along. If you tie yourself to a railway line you don't have to wait until you can see the train coming before you start to think you're in danger. So why not just carry on as usual?"

"I didn't know you felt like that."

"Of course you didn't. As far as you're concerned I'm just the old fool in the saloon bar. End of story."

Carver had a point, Norton supposed. If anyone had asked him whether there was going to be a nuclear war in his lifetime he would probably have said yes. If anyone had asked what he was doing about it he would have shrugged and said, well, what could you do? He had friends active in the various protest movements, but couldn't help viewing their efforts as futile. Some of them would virtually admit as much sometimes, if pressed. The difference was that they couldn't bear to sit still while some hope – however remote – remained, whereas he couldn't be bothered with gestures which seemed extremely unlikely to produce results. He would rather watch TV or spend the evening in the pub.

The other difficulty was that he couldn't really picture it in his mind's eye, couldn't visualise London consumed by blast and fire, couldn't imagine the millions of deaths, the survivors of the blast explosion dying in fallout shelters, the ensuing chaos and anarchy. And because he found it unimaginable, on some level he told himself it could never happen, not here, not to him.

Being apathetic about politics – especially Middle-Eastern politics – he hadn't even been properly aware of the crisis developing until it reached flashpoint, with Russian and American troops clashing outside Rivadi. Then there had been government announcements, states of emergency, panic. Despite advice to stay at home the great mass of the population had headed out of the cities; unconfirmed rumours filtered back of clashes with troops on roads commandeered for military use. A few had stayed behind: some dutifully obeying government instructions, some doubtless oblivious to the whole thing, some, like Norton, unable to imagine an aftermath they would want to live in.

And then the sirens had sounded and he had set writing for the end; and they had stopped, and there was a silence which went on and on and on until Norton, like others, had gone into the streets and found himself in the middle of a situation far stranger than anything he could have imagined. The small urban island in which they stood – an irregular triangle no more than half a mile on a side – was beset by three virtually simultaneous groundburst explosions which had caused...what? A local fracture in spacetime? That was as good an explanation as any. Whatever the cause, the effect was to slow down subjective time in the locality by a factor of millions, reducing the spread of the detonations to a matter of a few yards every day, hemming them into their strange and fragile-seeming shells.

At first people hoped that the miracle – for so it

seemed – allowed some possibility of rescue, but they soon learned better. Between two of the wavefronts was a narrow corridor which coincided with a side road and led apparently to safety. One family, who had miscalculated their evacuation plans, piled into a car and drove off down the corridor, but halfway their car seemed suddenly to halt, as if frozen. Norton still looked at it occasionally. Through the rear window could be seen two young children, faces caught in smiles, hands arrested in mid-wave. It was clear that the phenomenon was only local, and crossing some invisible threshold they had emerged into the real-time world. At least, he thought, they would never have time to realise that their escape attempt had failed; it was left to those still trapped to experience anguish on their behalf.

Norton wondered what one of the many spy satellites which he supposed crossed overhead would make of the scene, if any of their equipment was sensitive enough to register anything. Perhaps some future historian, analysing the destruction of London, would slow down the film and wonder at an apparent burst of high-speed motion in the area on which the explosions converged. The historian would probably rub his or her eyes in puzzlement and dismiss it as an optical trick, like the after-images which played behind one's eyelids after staring into a bright light.

"So will you come?" Carver was saying. Norton dragged his attention back to the conversation, aware that Carver had been talking and that he had not been taking in what he was saying.

"Come? Where?"

"Through the interface. I want somebody else to see this. It's amazing, Norton. The experience of a lifetime. The best experience of a lifetime. Why miss it?"

Norton's first instinct was to protest that he wasn't interested, that there seemed little point in seeking out new experiences when extinction was, at best, days away, but then he realised that in fact some purposeful action – even a pretence at purposeful action would be welcome. Terminal patients given the bad news by their doctors didn't just lie down and wait to die, if they had any spirit; they got up and got on with their lives for as long as they could. In the last analysis that was all anyone could do, and here everybody – the Greek card players, the partygoers, Carver – seemed to be doing it except him.

"Sure," he said. "But what about protective clothing? You've got all that...." He gestured at Carver's bulky and absurd-looking outfit.

"It's unnecessary. In fact it's hotter out here than it is there. I don't know what I was thinking about – if I had run into the heat a thousand of these would have been no protection. All you need is goggles, and I've got a spare pair at home."

Carver got up, tossed a £5 note on the table and walked away, gesturing Norton to follow. He lived just off the High Road, in a large, double-fronted redbrick Victorian house, most of whose neighbours had been turned into bedsits. His house was still intact, though the front garden was a tangle of hollyhocks choking amid brambles, and the wood in the window sashes was visibly rotten. Little attention was evidently paid to its upkeep.



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Inside was a dim hallway floored with cracked brown linoleum and cluttered with coatstands and hetracks. There was a heavy odour of dust, old leather and indefinable decay.

Carver went through into one of the rear rooms. Norton followed, then paused in the open doorway. It was a large room, with French windows opening on to the garden. It was impossible to tell what the decorations might have once been like, because the whole room was choked with a profusion of different objects. All the walls were lined from floor to ceiling with books, old and expensive bindings jammed alongside garish paperbacks seemingly at random. More books were heaped on the floor, in chairs and on tables. The rest of the room was a wild assortment of clocks, globes, stuffed animals, model ships and engines, old scientific and medical equipment, porcelain, musical instruments and countless other items. Carver made his way – almost wading through the detritus – to a desk, where some of the clutter had been pushed aside and a second pair of goggles lay amid knives, glues and offcuts of polarized plastic.

"Don't mind the mess," he said jovially, seeing Norton still hovering uncertainly by the door. "The whole house is like this, I'm afraid. Never could stop accumulating stuff. Never could throw anything out. My wife used to say I'd been a jackdaw in my previous lives. That's why I didn't leave, you know. I couldn't start off again somewhere else without all this. Sometimes I think there's more of me here –" his gesture took in the room, and the other rooms beyond it – "than here." He tapped the side of his skull.

Norton suddenly warned to the man, seeing him properly for the first time as another human being, not just an irritating presence. Carver seemed to sense this and turned to fiddle with the goggles for long seconds while embarrassment dispersed from the atmosphere. "I made these up myself," he said. "Ordinary dark glasses are no good. You need extra thicknesses, lots of them. Trouble is, if you put the things on anywhere else you can't see a damn thing."

Carver insisted on showing Norton the place where he had gone exploring earlier, though he was equally adamant that this time they would cross over somewhere else. He had stripped off the cumbersome protective suit and now cut an unlikely figure as a pioneer in a Hawaiian-style shirt and corduroy slacks. He had uprooted two stout wooden poles, giving one to Norton and keeping the other himself. They walked away from the High Road, took the second turning on the left, and came face to face with another wall of shimmering, eye-wrenching colourlessness. On its surface, as if holographic images had been pasted to it, were images of Carver's back as he crossed the interface and his front view as he returned.

"You see," Carver said, "light can't escape, so the image is trapped there like a fly in amber until the thing moves forward far enough for it to break up. It's already starting to happen."

Looking closely Norton could see that indeed the images were taking on a slightly unfocused aspect, as though viewed through a wavering heat haze.

They walked back to the High Road, passed the cafe where a group of men were standing round a table watching five more play out an obviously tense card

game; side bets were apparently being exchanged – and approached the interface which blocked the street.

"Right," Carver said. "Keep close by me, if in doubt wave the stick in front of you. If not in doubt still wave the stick in front of you." He laughed, and Norton smiled in return. They pulled on their goggles and then, like blind men, tapping their way with their sticks, they walked through the interface, leaving their departing images stuck to its surface so that to anyone casually watching from the cafe it would have looked as if they had both suddenly and improbably halted in mid-stride.

Norton found himself enveloped in a soundless blizzard of brilliant light. Even through the thick laminations of polarized plastic the luminosity was almost painful: it was like looking too near to the sun, except that there was nowhere to turn away. The light seemed to bounce and swirl around him, to cascade on his head and fountain up from the ground. There was a singing in his ears, and he felt as though he was walking into a wind, a zephyr of pure incandescence, its photon pressure sufficient to resist his progress.

He felt exhilarated, almost ecstatic, as if he was coming face to face with God. The light was cleansing, purifying. He found that he was moving with an involuntary swimming motion of his arms, propelling himself into the cool heart of this artificial sun with a clumsy breaststroke.

"Norton! Be careful!" Carver's voice came as if from under water, far away; it splashed faintly against his ears but was washed away in the radiant tide.

Carver was at his side, tugging at his shirt. He turned and looked at the other man. Carver seemed to glow, to fluoresce. The intense effulgence overpowered ordinary colour, making him a surreal sculpture in degrees of brilliant white. His skin seemed luminous and translucent, and when Norton lifted his own hand he found it was the same; he fancied he could see dim outlines of bone through the flesh. When Carver moved he cut swathes through the light; a sudden motion of his stick sent splintered refractions in all directions.

"Carver –" Norton said, and his words seemed to be snatched away as if he was talking into a silent hurricane. "This is extraordinary...incredible..." The sentence trailed away; he had no words to describe the experience.

Carver laughed. "Who'd have thought that this lay in the heart of a nuclear explosion, eh? I don't know, though – those slow-motion films always were beautiful if you could forget what they were."

"How far can we go?" Norton shouted, turning away and moving towards the heart of the radiance, using his cane like a mine-detector.

"Only a few yards. You'll see."

Norton moved on a dozen paces, then the tip of his stick abruptly exploded into brilliant fire, like a sparkler on Guy Fawkes' Night. He withdrew it, stamped on the burning end. Several inches had vanished from its tip in an instant.

"It's here," he called in warning. "Just ahead."

Peering forwards he fancied he could see the further interface, the fireball advancing at its own slow, inexorable pace behind the light flash. Even through the radiance he thought he could detect flickering patterns

of orange flame dancing across its surface. Norton was suddenly reminded of what lay beyond there...but for now it was enough to be drifting, clad in a nimbus of cool white fire.

Carver, a pale haloed ghost of a figure, was at his side. He swished his stick playfully through the fireball's surface, coming away each time with a couple of inches less on the tip. He was like a lion-tamer, holding inconceivable energy at bay with just the stick and the force of his personality.

"Don't get too close," Norton warned, as the other man edged forward. Carver took no notice, so Norton tapped him on the shoulder with his own stick. Carver began to turn, but as he did so his foot caught on the kerbstone. He teetered, began to fall backwards, mouth widening in surprise: fell faster than Norton could lunge forwards, into the fireball.

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion, as though Carver had fallen into still another time anomaly. He appeared to hang suspended as his hair burst into flame and his skin began to char. Puffs of steam rose from his body. His shirt was consumed so quickly that it simply seemed to vanish. His lips drew back as if he was about to say something, but they were only shrivelling with the heat. Behind them the gums burned away, exposing bone that blackened swiftly, though the teeth remained anomalously white until the enamel cracked and burst. The goggles melted, exposing steaming sockets in a face that was turning into a skull even as he fell. His body cooked, as if Norton was watching an accelerated film of meat being roasted. The skin crisped, then peeled away; the flesh followed, crumbling and flaking away from bones that snapped and popped from their sockets and themselves began to burn. By the time Carver hit the ground all that was left of him was a charred heap of smouldering detritus which blew away in clouds of ash even as it settled. It had taken only seconds; the only sound which reached Norton was a soft, almost plaintive sigh.

Norton watched, transfixed with horror. Then as nausea rose in him he stumbled away, dropping his stick. He burst out of the interface into total darkness – then ripped off the goggles and squatted by the pavement, retching until all he could wring from his stomach was a thin trickle of sour yellow bile.

Now, as Norton looked sidelong at the images recording the beginning and end of yesterday's tragic adventure, he saw that the interface was undergoing a change. Patterns played more vigorously across its surface: fans of light sprayed outwards briefly; it seemed to vibrate, as if to a deep bass tone. It's breaking down, he thought. It won't be long now.

To his surprise his major feeling was not fear but relief. He understood now why condemned prisoners

sometimes sacked their lawyers and actively sought their execution rather than trying to delay it.

He felt he would prefer to be at home when it happened, so he turned back into Marlborough Street. As he passed number 6 a voice called out his name. It was Mr McDonald, a friendly and gregarious pensioner who lived there with his equally good-natured wife. Norton had always got on well with them on a pleasant superficial level. Lacking transport, the McDonalds had been unable to evacuate even if they had wanted to.

Mr McDonald was busily giving the sitting room windows a second coat of whitewash. "Just putting the final touches," he said cheerily. The McDonalds had spent the last eight days as they had spent the week before, turning part of their house into a fallout shelter, following an official instruction leaflet. To them the last week seemed to be a God-given opportunity to finish the job properly. Their house did not have a cellar, so they had fitted out the large cupboard under the stairs, protecting it with countless black dustbin bags filled with earth. Inside were carefully arranged supplies of food, water and medicine; bedding and primitive cooking equipment; and even a portable chemical toilet. Before retirement made such recreations impossible to afford the McDonalds had been keen campers, and regarded their expertise and lovingly-stored equipment as particular good fortune. A few days ago Mr McDonald had insisted on showing off their impressively well-organised shelter to Norton; had even offered to squeeze up and make room for three if he hadn't the materials to build his own defences. What was more, although the offer was made only out of politeness, Norton was sure the McDonalds would have gone through with it if he had pressed them. But he had declined politely, assuring them of the adequacy of his own preparations.

Now, with the image of Carver vivid in his mind, he felt like shouting at Mr McDonald, shocking him into a realisation of how futile his efforts were in the face of the kind of forces held delicately in check all around him. But it would only hurt and confuse the old man, who was simply following the instructions which he had been told would keep him safe.

Norton waved goodbye to Mr McDonald and started to walk away. But even as his foot lifted, the air seemed to shudder and split around him, and before his senses were able properly to register the phenomenon the world was filled with an instantaneous, consuming brilliance, a white fire that was neither cool nor pure.

Malcolm Edwards is one of Interzone's innumerable editors. Although he has been a freelance writer for some time, this is his first published short story.

Andy Soutter

THE QUIET KING OF THE GREEN SOUTH-WEST

The King in the evening: driving home in a small Vauxhall Cavalier with red upholstery, radio tuned to a French newscast. The King's small, substantial self strapped in securely. The car rocks through deep and narrow lanes that unwind as comfortably as a simulated film.

The entrance to his castle grounds is on top of the highest hill for miles around: two stone gate-pillars, but without the gate between. Here the King stops to talk business with one of his farmers, a seven-foot-three Australian with crewcut and beret who has been unloading bales of hay from a Land Rover. As the King talks quietly with the man he turns a very slow 360 degrees: below, the castle with river beneath it; around, a herd of beef cattle, larch plantations, sheep. Far off, a town sits at the tidal limit of the river. Cabbage field. Church tower. Black dogs, old villagers. Strawberry field. Tumulus. Dairy. Creek. River. Sheep. Barn. Nettles. Drinking-trough. The tall Australian.

The castle: no battlements or moat. The King drives to the front entrance and stops gently on the gravel. To one side, on the front lawn, is a large sculpture, somewhat abstract, made by the country's most revered living sculptor. Sometimes it appears to be a set of vast, hacked and weathered male genitalia, black and cumbersome; yet a touch of the tiniest finger against its pedestal will send it spinning round and round, infinitely mobile. On the other side of the building and much closer to the walls is a small work by the country's most famous sculptress: a polished monolith with a hole in the middle on a rigid plinth. The King always arrives home at this time, and he walks indoors.

Inside the large oval entrance hall the King can look up to the very roof, past the railed galleries of the

upper floors, to a frescoed ceiling that shows figures in flowing robes engaged in nebulous activities. A chandelier hangs not so far above him, on a very long gold chain. The King slips through a small side door and begins to climb a steep, cramped stairway. For some reason unknown, the architect of this mansion omitted the kind of grand staircase that would be expected and deserved by such a building. Some people think that it was simply forgotten, and that the man added the modest riser that the King now climbs as a hasty afterthought. This amused the King when he first took possession, although nowadays he has mixed feelings. He climbs on. Somewhere in the resonating passages he can hear claws rattle and a dog bark: through a small window he can glance down to a walled courtyard where one of his wife's long green robes is dripping on a clothes line, as always at this time of day; and from elsewhere as he climbs he can hear a cello playing in a style that is concerned with exploring the idiosyncrasies of the instrument itself and delivering a collection of existential sounds rather than an argumentative series of notes: he hears a pluck . . . a rap on what must be thin, strong, brown wood...then a screech from something sharply bowed, a sound so metallic that it can only have come from the cello's spike-stand.

The King has reached the top floor, in contrast to the rest of the castle, low-ceilinged and small-roomed. He enters one of these and locks the door behind him. It's a lumbercloset of a space; a tiny window lets a little light in on dusty shafts; most of the plaster has crumbled from the walls, exposing lath-work and studs; there are bundles of old manuscripts,

certificates and degrees yellowing with age: there is the King's old tuck-box, full of schoolboy mementoes that have lain undisturbed since he took leave of Latin, Algebra and his pubescent fog, and graduated to Politics, Philosophy & Economics and a senile servant who carried the very bags that lie gathering dust in this room, across a quadrangle to a stone-arched and flagstoned undergraduate cell, so long ago now. Of both lacks the King has tender memories, sweetened by the knowledge that they are both long dead – the one of old age and hardening arteries, the other of the fortunes of a war in which he served as a gallant young captain. The King is well aware that the days of Imperial wars, of Imperialism and Capitalism themselves, are over now, and he spends much time advocating in journals, newspapers, and his own practice, a system where decentralisation and ecology go hand in hand, for he is indeed a New Feudalist: as such he feels a great responsibility towards the management of his vast tracts of estate – the tied colleges, industries, shops and workers; the committees that he chairs: all things green and golden. In the room also is a small desk with a typewriter, not so dusty. At this time of day he has a particular task to carry out. He takes 64 sheets of paper and places them next to the machine, taking up the first and inserting it. He types:

Can we say something which is unsayable? If we can even conceptualise "Saying something unsayable", what does this imply?

An hour later the sun has almost set. The King emerges from his cobwebbed den and walks along the tiny corridor that gives out on the central gallery. Here he can almost touch the figures on the domed ceiling. There is no sound of the post-Schoenbergian cello. Instead, he hears the steady rhythm of a loom at work a floor below. His wife is at her shuttle and all is as always. She makes hangings, banners, flags of make-believe states, wild abstracts with the coarse wool that she spins herself, and hangs them in the schools, libraries and public halls of the southwest, folk being too polite to refuse, although they are much mystified by the purpose of these objects, often of anarchic shape, many with great lumps of yarn hanging skew-whiff, thick messy warps and chaotic red and purple wefts: sometimes foreign objects are incorporated into these works – dried flesh, horn, and blood, and they blend completely with the heavy earth colours of the King's wife's heretic blankets. The King descends, reassured by the rattling.

He walks out across the gravel, across the front lawn, and steps down out of sight into the hush. On the other side of this sunken track is a large field of thick grass that slopes down to the river. The King sits on a stile, at peace, and watches his harem wandering slowly towards him, and chewing. One or two of this Jersey herd, the younger ones, are still a little frisky: the rest are slowing down: it is now some hours since they were milked, relieved by the illiterate dairymaid. Now the King steps into the field and wanders amongst them, whispering endearments, patting them, not without an eye to their health. The King produces his sheaf of 64 typescripts and selects the top leaf, the one beginning, Can we say something which is unsayable?

"Here we are Lollipop," he says to a cow, "Spring is

here again, and the first one is for you." He holds her head close to him: he slips his hand behind her soft furry ear and gently rubs for a moment, feeling the warmth. Then he folds the slip of paper and places it there. There are 64 in the herd, a piece of paper for each. It is almost dark when the King delivers the last message (If you turn on the light quickly enough you can see what the dark looks like). The herd is lying down as the grass dampens and the King makes his way back to the castle. As he crosses the gravel, bats flicker about the great building and he can smell beef cooking.

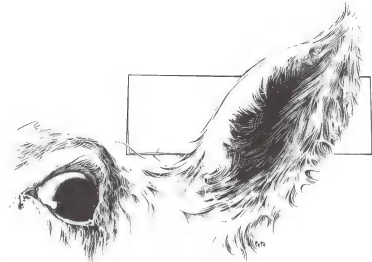
Early next morning the King steps out into the pasture and visits his herd. Behind each soft warm ear is a flower, and soon the King is walking back to his home with a bunch of 64 blooms. Intoxicated with their scent. He disappears into the castle, and a minute later re-emerges, now carrying a leather briefcase into his Cavalier and off up the drive. As he goes he sings snatches of joyous hymn – "Lord Of All Hopefulness..." Spring is here, there are committees to persuade, plans to carry out, powers to win back. The King is full of optimism. In the lanes, the odd daffodil has surfaced, like a nervous periscope.

In a far corner of the castle lands, in a deep hollow, lies a wide, silent pond, surrounded by tangled thickets and bamboo groves, overhung with trees, populated by carp, pike, duck and marsh harrier. A slippery, rickety causeway is tilted out to the middle of this remote water, where is built a precarious hut, its timbers as ancient as some of the oldest oak trees that border the pool. Here, colour and silence have more depth and resonance: the differences between shades of deep blue and green, like the long silences that interrupt and muffle a bird's cry or a splash of water, are more significant in this place than elsewhere. It is a mysterious theatre. In the distance a trail of young mallards hurries evenly behind reeds, a well-trained chorus line. As if pulled by wire, a heron lifts off and away.

Virgin and divorcée alike have found their way here and out to the hut, picking their way across the treacherous narrow planks: sometimes, despite the danger, becoming hypnotised by the hallucinogenic configurations of the water below, of the pondweed rising and falling, green-gold beneath, of reflections, tints and suggestions. They come to visit the hut's single occupant.

Sometimes these visitors, who may have travelled on foot from the tidehead town, or from a nearby village, bring flowers to the hut, blooms that are often bruised or broken by the time they arrive, because the journey from the bankside across the decaying timbers often takes as long for the visitor as the miles he or she has already walked, especially when there is a strong breeze at work, bending the reeds and threatening to topple the bidge-walker. The hut's resident can, however, cross his causeway with ease, so familiar is he with its boards, gaps and stilts, and can even use the most green and rotted, fungi-infested wood, so finely can he gauge the tolerance of the sodden and papery fibres.

His hut has room enough for a workbench, a few drawers and shelves, a small stove and a bed. On the bench are trays of green liquid: also fish-scales that



have been preserved in some mysterious way: a magnifying-glass; tweezers and scalpels. Bottles of scent are stored on the shelves, along with a cage of silkworms. A curious structure built of mirrors and lenses points from the benchtop out of the window, then downwards in an inverted V. It's not a telescope, microscope or sextant: it lacks the accompanying brass, leather and gradations, and also the symmetry of these instruments.

This tenant, whose ears are slightly pointed, is a small man, standing the same height as the King his master. In return for his tenure he performs a number of obscure duties. For example on the rare occasions when the King and his wife want to cross the river by boat, he acts as ferryman. These events are conversationless, since the King never speaks to his wife nor she to him, and the fester (for that's his title) must only speak to them when performing certain public acts between April and September – rituals and ceremonies at the castle and elsewhere in the green southwest that involve chants and simple magic. In the winter months the fester hibernates far away in the central Metropolis, and appears in the green southwest each springtime, with hollow eyes and unsteady hands. Within 24 hours however, he has resumed his ageless appearance and is ready to receive visitors. To the innocent, he is a man; to the ruined, a boy. He will implore divorcées from the town (after twittering in ecstasy beneath their lustful bodies) to study Angels more thoroughly; and after gently bugging some fifteen-year-old, will advise the creature to shed its

social conscience somewhat: We are all only mayflies, he will intone, Here today & gone tomorrow, so live for yourself moose, forget the dryness of march and struggle. So, the divorcée will emerge from the hut ready to forgive solicitors and those with custody of their children; and the student will take the novelty of a tingling anus into the committee meeting.

This very afternoon, as the air cools and the fish begin to feed, as the sun grows fatter and shadows grow thinner as if drained of life by their maker, a disembodied head appears in the reeds of the King's pond, and glides slowly out towards the middle. As it travels, hair spread out behind; it does not disturb a single creature, and leaves only the vaguest of ripples on the surface. It is the head of a woman, with intense, wide eyes under a high forehead, carrying the most deliberate of expressions.

And again the King climbs his steep, narrow stair. Dam, he considers (there had been a meeting of the water board), is Mad, spelled backwards. Reserve is an anagram of Reverse. Which is also backwards. Installed in his den, he goes to the wall to consult his dictionary (the separate volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary are hung there by a silver chain from the picture rail, at viewing height; in this way the King's den is no different from the rest of the castle, in that instead of great paintings – but hung as if they were – revered works of literature and reference adorn all its walls, from the great family bible and other exquisitely tooled tomes of majestic format through handsomely bound editions of Dickens, to the modern miniatures of collaboration between John Calder, Whaaston Printers of Exeter and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

A trapdoor opens in the floor of the pond-hut as the woman's head draws to a halt underneath, where snails crawl and mosquitoes hatch. As if drawn by gravity, the voice of the Jester falls upon its ears, a steady, mesmerising rhythm. The voice begins, "Can we say something which is unsayable?..."

This evening the Jersey herd is in a far pasture. The King steps out with his papers wearing a light anorak: for a breeze has sprung up along with some vindictive-looking clouds on the horizon that look bruised from their experiences over the moors that lie to the north. The King's black-and-white beef herd are restless, hungry and bellowing. The giant Australian should have fed them by now, or they merely want more. Once this farmer felled one of the beasts, a particularly noisy and impatient animal, by throwing a bale into its side with the ease of a child pushing away a balloon. The King passes alongside of their field and the animals gather there, following and trumpeting. Is it just food they want? The King feels uneasy. He leaves them behind, passing through a sheep field and then a creaking larch plantation, and finally beholds his dairy herd. When he has delivered all his messages, tucked them safely behind each ear, he turns to leave. Now the wind is stronger and the clouds are lower. The King hurries back to his castle, taking a route that avoids the beef herd.

"If you turn on the light quickly enough, you can see what the darkness looks like." And the Jester's voice stops, the watergate closes, and the head turns away and drifts back across the pond as the first gobs of rain arrive.

When the King reaches his castle, it is silent inside. No cello, no dog, no weaving shuttle. Just the smell of beef.

The head draws close to the bank and rises. Beneath it is the body of the King's wife emerging as the rain pours and the thunder splits. She has travelled this way before, unknown to the King. Her feet have regularly trod the sandy path that runs along the pond bed: but this path too is treacherous and narrow, and either side lies the deep, embracing, pink mud; and perhaps one day she will not return from here. But for now, temporarily drugged by the voice of the Jester and the words that he has fed her, she glances back and sees a glow in the hut's window before making off through a bamboo grove.

The King is looking out of a window when she arrives back at the castle. He nods at her from a distance; she nods back. So that's why she wasn't here as usual – caught out in the storm, soaking. The King is reassured, and turns for the dining room.

Now the Jester begins his night work. He uses no hurricane lamp or candle, but rather his lensed and complex moonlight condenser that receives moonrays reflected from the surface of the pond. This device also acts as a capacitor, so it will serve for a succession of moonless evenings. Now a strong glow spreads across his bench as he gathers the objects of his work: lame flowers, broken stems, crippled pistils; plants he has discovered trodden down in a meadow or forest track; flowers brought to him that have begun to wilt or smell sour; flowers that have been retrieved from laboratory dustbins, having been taken apart by researchers. Only moonlight can be the catalyst for these operations of the Jester. He slaves throughout the night, concentrating on nothing else.

Overnight the storm has blown out and the dawn is bright and sharp; the Jester now has a bunch of fresh-scented flowers to carry out, through the cool mist that rises from the pool and envelopes the causeway; through the wakening, twittering woods and into the King's wet pastures. The Jersey herd is snorting heavily and dreamily, though some are already feeding. The Jester removes the King's messages one by one, from behind each soft, warm ear, and replaces each with a bloom. When this is done and the harem bedecked, he turns back across the pasture, head down, reading the slips of paper as he goes. Not looking up, still reading, he crosses his rickety bridge and re-enters the hut. Next to the trapdoor in the floor is a box containing yesterday's 64 slips of paper; he removes these and stuffs them into his stove, then refills the box with the messages he has just brought in. Then he sits and broods, and waits for visitors.

Andy Soutter was born in London in 1950 and brought up in West Hampstead and East Anglia. Since 1976 he has worked mostly in the theatre, performing and writing. "The Quiet King of the Green South West" is his second published story.



THE UR-PLANT

BARRINGTON J. BAYLEY

The man from Comodoro Rivadavia did not quite know what to expect as he alighted from his official vehicle in the centre of the academic city. He assumed the man standing at the kerbside was his host, but as he had never been in *Academia* he ignored him at first and scanned his surroundings, taking in the scene. The avenue was broad, crossed at intervals by equally wide intersecting roads. Beyond the varnished timber of the buildings, the lush darkness of the New Forest made an indistinct backdrop. The Andean peaks were only faintly visible, shining ghostlike in the thin sunlight.

"Señor Galtieri...?" Shyly the botanical geneticist stepped towards him. "I am Doctor Mengele. I am honoured that you should find the time to visit me, when you must have so many pressing duties." He shook the official's hand warmly. "It may be your wish to inspect the city while you are here. Not really a city, of course, but definitely a town. I see you are taking an interest in the layout. *Academia* is divided into segments. We stand now in my own department, the Botanical Lodge. Over there —" he indicated an extensive group of the ubiquitous darkwood structures — "is the Physics Lodge, which is the largest, while in that direction will be found the lodges for biology and for psychological studies. The Chemical Lodge is on the other side of the city. And so on. You know, Señor Galtieri, some visitors apparently think it incongruous for an entire lodge to be devoted to botany, a minor discipline in many people's eyes, but I assure you the work we have been doing here is of the utmost value! We —"

Galtieri cut off his anxious pleadings. "I am here only to judge on your request, Doctor. I return to the capital in the morning." He cast a caustic glance into Mengele's florid features. "Do you think we could go inside? I find the air rather cold."

"Of course," Mengele muttered, and led him through a veranda and into a dimmer interior which seemed little warmer than the outside. "I will show you your

quarters presently. But first how about something to take the chill off things, ha?" He showed Galtieri a bottle of blended tequila, and at his nod poured two measures in tall glasses.

"And so how do things look from Rivadavia?" he said with an attempt at camaraderie once they had drunk. "We do tend to get out of touch here..."

Galtieri shrugged indifferently. "Things are much the same. The gringo fleet still lies off our shores. It still makes no move."

"Of course not, while our nuclear arsenal stands poised at readiness. The *nordamericanos* have learned once before that we will use our weapons to defend our national honour." Mengele spoke the words vacuously. It was the sort of thing one was expected to say at moments like this.

"It is rumoured that they seek to renew their alliance with Brazil. That could alter the complexion of things..."

The doctor put on a show of exasperation. "Brazilians — pah! Those Portuguese-speaking pigs are little better than gringos themselves. Besides, they are racially corrupt." Thoughtfully he laid down his glass. "Señor Galtieri, could this prejudice my request? Let me be frank. If the government orders blow for blow for any further insult we receive, then there will likely be some nuclear retaliation upon ourselves. *Academia* could conceivably...in any case I am anxious that my specimen be planted in the Amazonian Reserve, its most natural environment. But if Brazil is now to be our enemy..."

"Oh, that is not too much of a problem," Galtieri held out his glass for more tequila. "We have had people operating into Brazil for decades. Anyway, the administration does not shrink from another war with Brazil. Have no doubt, if it comes we shall regain both Buenos Aires and the province of Uruguay. Never shall we abandon our holy destiny."

"To Greater Argentina," murmured Mengele, as they drank again.

"And now, doctor, do you mind telling me what is so special about today's date?" Galtieri queried. "You have exerted yourself considerably to get me here - so what's involved in this 'demonstration'?"

Knowingly, Doctor Mengele smiled. "You will see, Señor Galtieri, you will see. May I suggest you rest for a while? My demonstration will not take place until midnight, and while I do not think it will last long I do not want to tire you."

"Very well," Mengele's words put Galtieri in a bad mood. It displeased him to be told what to do, more or less, by an inferior. As a senior administrator he was accustomed to taking orders from no one but the military. "We must humour you scientists, I suppose. And the trip has tired me a little."

While the chauffeur who had driven him from the airstrip carried in his luggage, Mengele showed him to a pleasant, quiet room in the same building. After turning on the small electric heater, Galtieri lay down on the bed, and slept.

When he awoke several hours had passed, for he found himself in darkness, gazing at the faintly luminous window. After some moments he realised he had been awakened by a knock on the door. Stirring himself with an effort, he stumbled to the light switch. Then, blinking, he drew back the door panel.

In the passage stood a slightly bowed figure whose air of diffidence was not helped by the crumpled black suit he wore. With him he had a large black box which he had placed on the floor. He looked directly at Galtieri only once, seeming thenceforth unwilling to meet his eye. "Señor Galtieri?" he began. "I am Professor Borges. Doctor Mengele regrets he cannot entertain you to dinner tonight...he is busy in the floricultarium. I have offered to present myself in his place. Señor Galtieri, may I come in for a few moments?"

Wordlessly Galtieri opened the door wider and beckoned him inside. Sitting on his bed, he watched the professor clumsily lug in the box. "What have you got there?" he asked.

"Something I am anxious to show you, Señor Galtieri," Professor Borges' voice was retiring and rather high-pitched; so quiet that the listener had to concentrate in order to hear what was said. "I do hope you will not think I am trying to rival the good doctor. Your visit is, however, the opportunity I have been seeking to bring my own work to the notice of the administration."

He was unfastening the box's clasps and lifting out an oddly shaped apparatus. Galtieri knew he should be annoyed at the professor's presumptuousness, but instead he merely listened as Borges went on: "In many ways, Señor Galtieri, our Academia is like one of the schools of ancient times...the Pythagorean Society, or Aristotle's Academy. By that I refer to its interdisciplinary dimension, which has been enormously fruitful - I myself am an ardent interdisciplinarian - added to which there is our relative seclusion from the rest of the academic world. This has released us from the deadweight of normal opinion, so that we have taken directions outsiders might regard as wholly too fanciful. Are you interested in philosophy, Señor Galtieri?"

There was a long pause before Galtieri replied. "Actually, I am," he said. As a matter of fact it was his bedtime reading. He had a well-thumbed copy of Plato's *Republic* in his luggage right now.

"Good. Then you might be interested in a project which some of us have discussed over the years, in a theoretical way, the construction of a microscope. This would be the opposite of a microscope..."

"Do you mean a telescope?" Galtieri interrupted, puzzled.

"Not at all. A telescope discerns distant objects. There is nothing remarkable about it. No - whereas a microscope makes perceptible the invisibly small, a macroscope would correspondingly make perceptible the invisibly large. Size is a cosmic dimension - we are suspended between the infinite and infinitesimal, are we not?" Borges giggled softly. "One wonders what would be seen through the macroscope: Platonic forms, perhaps? The gods themselves?" Suddenly he blushed. "I beg your pardon, Señor Galtieri - I did not mean to be blasphemous. I meant angels, of course."

With a glance at the crucifix on the wall, Galtieri smiled sourly. "That is all right."

He turned his attention to the device on the table. It looked like a piece of abstract sculpture: a matte black box above which was mounted some sort of dull metal mirror or reflector: oval and concave, perhaps a foot tall and half as wide. "So is that it?"

"Oh no, Señor Galtieri," Borges giggled again. "Merely a step towards it. You see, I alone have tried to take the project forward from the theoretical to the practical sphere. Early on I came to the conclusion that to be effective a macroscope must first of all be able to perceive. It is more than a simple focusing device. It would be some sort of staging apparatus, perceiving on a large scale - how I do not know as yet - and reproducing its field of view on a scale discernible by ourselves. Luckily my hobby is microprocessing, and so I applied myself to the difficult question of machine perception. The device you see before you is a crucial breakthrough, Señor Galtieri. It is a seeing machine."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Galtieri said bluntly. "My household cleaning robot can see perfectly. So can any industrial handling machine."

"You misunderstand me, Señor Galtieri. Those devices do not really see. They only recognise. They operate by matching shapes, colours, forms - or else sounds - to an internally stored library. Our own brains do the same thing, but it is not the same as seeing. When we look at a familiar face, or object, the recognition process is carried out automatically without our knowing it; the result of this, as a gestalt, is what is then presented to our awareness."

"Machines have no awareness - that is what you mean?"

"Exactly!" Borges wiped his brow in what was almost a gesture of weariness. "The construction of a machine with awareness-seeing, to coin a phrase, has consistently defeated microprocessor designers. The reason is that microprocessors operate in a manner radically different from the organic brain's: they work sequentially, carrying out only one operation at a time. When confronted with a shape, for instance, the microprocessor scans it and then analyses the results for geometrical features, which are then compared one by

one with a stored list of such features. An attempt at identification is then made. It is all very time-consuming. Your cleaning robot, Señor Galtieri, recognises things rather slowly."

"So I have noticed," Galtieri's sleepiness was dissipating, and with it his patience. "Are you going to come to the point, professor?"

"Of course, Señor Galtieri, of course," Borges wrung his hands nervously. "But please bear with me for a short while. We must consider how seeing is accomplished in the human brain. First of all, it is not done sequentially, for the brain does not operate sequentially: it works on a branching principle or spreading nerve nets. One brain cell outputs its signal to anything between one and several hundred other brain cells, and with a single discharge may send a wave of excitation through whole cortical regions, arousing billions of cells simultaneously. The arrangement seems haphazard from one point of view, but it performs miracles despite the creeping rate of nervous impulse, which propagate at only two hundred miles per hour."

"I reasoned that the multidimensionality of nervous interconnectivity is precisely what enables true perception to occur. Awareness is a holistic phenomenon. Instead of painstakingly analysing information gleaned from the external world, as a microprocessor does, the brain maps external events to dedicated groups of brain cells. The mapping is one to one: for every perceivable type of event, there is a group of cells that responds to it. Thus the external landscape is reproduced as an internal mapped landscape, and it is this that awareness consists of."

"Señor Galtieri, do you know the ancient phrases 'microcosm and macrocosm' so beloved of the alchemists? I believe they refer to the awareness process. The world at large, or macrocosm, is recreated in mapped or model form, complete with all relevant connectivities, as a microcosm in our skulls. I set out to accomplish the same artificially. I designed, in place of normal transistors, 'neuristors' with up to a hundred connecting dendrites, and these I arranged in the necessary nets. I drew the masks myself, a labour of two years: they were reduced and put on chip with the assistance of the Applied Electronics Lodge. The architecture draws on brain anatomy rather than normal chip mapping, and being purely electronic, the machine has a marked speed advantage over the organic brain. From a quiescent state an activating signal can spread to the whole ensemble in a few nanoseconds, the precise time depending on the nature of the signal. Incidentally, only one chip is involved. It is nine inches square and has so many layers it is an inch thick. Have I made myself clear, Señor Galtieri? If there is anything you do not understand..."

Galtieri stared incredulously. "You are telling me that thing is conscious?" he demanded.

"Not conscious, Señor Galtieri. Aware. They are not the same, our Psychological Lodge has definitely established that." Seeing Galtieri's uncomprehending frown, Borges went on: "It turns out that consciousness, the faculty that makes you and I what we are, is a more elaborate construction than simple awareness; the latter is, so to speak, the basic building material of consciousness proper."

"So what's the difference?"

"To put it at its crudest, consciousness is awareness with knowledge. There are additional components: memory, mental process, but above all subject as well as object – subject being the experience of 'the perceiving self'. This I cannot duplicate as yet. This machine is aware – but only of what it sees. It does not know of its own existence. Do you understand what this means, Señor Galtieri? The machine experiences the being of what it sees, but nothing else. It identifies itself perfectly with the object of vision, believing itself to be that insofar as it believes anything?"

"Is this not a difficult concept?" Galtieri asked, interested despite his doubts as to Borges's sanity.

"Perhaps, but it is a real one. Try to imagine your own consciousness emptied of everything except pure awareness of objects – all sense of self gone, no thoughts present. That is something like it. The state can be induced by drugs, or occasionally, by meditation practices."

"And do you propose to advance from there to consciousness as we understand it?"

"The predominant feature of our consciousness – our awareness of individual self – proves to be curiously convoluted. I am a long way from duplicating it. But the first step is undoubtedly to provide a sense of continuity, and this is easily done by adding a memory facility."

Professor Borges stepped hesitantly to the machine and extended a hand as though to give it an affectionate touch, or as though to bestow a benediction. He hesitated again, then turned the reflector to face Galtieri.

"At the moment the machine is aware of Señor Galtieri," he explained. "It is Señor Galtieri, so complete is its identification with the object of perception. But if I turn it elsewhere, it will instantly forget it ever was Señor Galtieri, and will identify instead with the next perception. By pressing this button, however, I bring memory into play."

He touched one of two studs at the base of the device. Then he rotated the concave reflector towards himself. "There. The machine now remembers the being of Señor Galtieri; that is its first identification. My own image is like a rival ghost-being superimposed upon that of Señor Galtieri."

"It sees you through me, so to speak?"

"Yes, you have it."

Galtieri grunted. "A somewhat specious version of a conscious self."

"Indeed. Yet it may conceivably be advanced to the stage where the machine experiences itself as a true subject."

He depressed the second button, emptying the memory. "Actually, Señor Galtieri, I now take the view that the conscious self is a specious construct. It is a quirk. Simple awareness is more basic."

"Is that curved thing what it sees with?" Galtieri asked.

"That is its eye."

"What would be wrong with a simple television camera?"

"It is a TV camera, of the mosaic type, but of non-standard design. It does not need to scan, you see,

since the processor does not require it. It also has a range of sensitivity greater than our own: several octaves to either side of the visible spectrum."

"A mirror of being," Galtieri murmured. "What a peculiar intelligence."

"It is a triumph for Argentina. Señor Galtieri I can say that without arrogance. We now lead the world in the field of machine perception. Señor Galtieri, I am hoping you will not forget this when the next appropriation settlements are made."

"It has some interesting philosophical implications, at any rate," Galtieri gazed at the floor and rubbed his chin. "But has it any use as it stands?"

Professor Borges appeared to debate within himself before replying. "It has occurred to me that my machine accomplishes in the ultimate degree the art of the painter or still photographer. Such people, if they have genius, do not bother themselves with the bland reporting of facts. Their art is to capture the moment: the curve of an extended hand caught in sunlight, the fleeting expression on a girl's face, the perception of living evanescent being. My machine produces the very state of awareness the artist strives for - heightened intensity of vision uncluttered by thought or preoccupation with ego. With the added memory facility, it snatches moments out of time and preserves their authentic identity. Perhaps some way could be found to project this awareness of being through a viewer...it would be a considerable advance as a camera."

Having reached the climax and object of his intrusion, Professor Borges busied himself replacing the machine in its case with loving care. "I hope you do not mind dining so late, Señor Galtieri, but I did not want to disturb you needlessly. A meal is on order in the dining room. Professor Amadeo Vegas and Doctor Herrera Fraga will be joining us."

"Yes, that will be fine. Let me freshen up a little first."

"Then if it meets with your requirements I will return in twenty minutes?"

"Of course."

The professor glanced at his watch. Carefully, his feet making no noise on the floor for all his physical awkwardness, he crept from the room.

The food was unremarkable: prime beefsteak in a krell and chili sauce. Vegas and Fraga were not dissimilar in type to their colleague Borges: retiring, erudite, and physically soft. If this was the Academia norm then Mengele, Galtieri realised, was unusual.

It was of Mengele, clearly held in high regard, that they spoke. "Of course, genetics is traditional in his family," Fraga told Galtieri. "You know, I suppose, that he is the son of the great Doctor Mengele who did such valuable work in the 20th century?"

"That Mengele?" Galtieri raised his eyebrows. "Yet he does not look at all Teutonic. He is definitely swarthy, in fact."

"His mother's influence. He is a proud Hispanic."

"Hmmm...the old Doctor Mengele concerned himself with the creation of a biological master race, did he not?"

"Yes," Vegas answered. "It was a particular historical preoccupation of the time. But you will find Men-

gele sensitive and evasive if you try to question him about it."

"Indeed? Tell me, is it true his father succeeded in cloning Adolf Hitler?"

There were smiles. "That is an unsupported rumour," Vegas said. "Very likely he tried but failed - cloning a higher mammal is rarely successful even now. Mengele himself only laughs when the subject is raised."

Borges made a musing voice. "Isn't it a little curious that the Doctor should restrict himself to plant genetics? His father's specific interest was the human genotype - yet I recall that cloning was originally a gardener's technique, known as vegetative propagation."

"You imply an indirect attack on an old problem?" Fraga asked.

"I would suggest a different explanation," butted in Professor Vegas. He had been introduced to Galtieri as hailing from the Psychological Lodge. "The old Mengele drew a deal of criticism for having carried out research using human subjects. It is possible this criticism is what caused his son to turn aside from warm-blooded organisms."

"That does seem overly sensitive," Galtieri remarked.

"Did you ever hear the story of the portrait painter who was beaten and crippled by a street mob? As he lay in the gutter a dog licked his wounds. For that, one of the mob promptly killed it with a stick. From that time on the portrait artist painted only animals."

Galtieri frowned. He could not see the point of the story. "What can you tell me about the demonstration tonight? Mengele has told me very little."

"We had better not tell you anything. Mengele would be very annoyed if we stole his thunder. He can be very touchy."

Peerved, Galtieri laid down his napkin. He glanced at Borges' box, which the professor had carried into the dining room and placed close by him.

"Professor Borges has told me of the macroscope project," he said, deciding to change the topic. "That is not a prohibited subject, I suppose?"

"Not at all," smiled Doctor Fraga. "It is all a waste of time, that is all. As I have already told Professor Borges many times, the macroscope already exists in the form of astrology. Every horoscope is a macroscope..."

Galtieri slapped his thigh and laughed. "So what do you say to that, Professor, ha?"

Borges' reply was bland. "Superficially the argument is appealing, but the horoscope maps features already visible to the eye."

"Ah, you forget the psychological aspects," Fraga retorted. "Astrology is not child's play."

"Perhaps," Borges said. "By the way, Señor Galtieri, Mengele himself said something rather odd. He told me yesterday that the new plant he has created may turn out to be the very macroscope we seek. A strange outcome for plant genetics, if so."

Midnight was approaching by the time the leisurely meal was finished. Galtieri grew impatient. He refused a cigar but was obliged to wait while the others smoked theirs.

Finally Borges scrutinised his watch. "It is time. Mengele said to arrive at eleven forty-five."

He picked up his machine as they rose from the

table. A short walk through darkwood corridors brought them to the open air, and Galtieri found it bitterly cold at this hour. Soon, however, they were in a large glass-walled building which by contrast was hot and steamy. By the cold light of the moon and of a few glimmering night-lamps, a veritable jungle was revealed, masses of orchids nestling amid dark green growths consisting of broad sword-shaped leaves, many of which towered over their heads.

Borges nudged Galtieri's elbow. "The floricultarium," he whispered, as though they were in a library. "Mengele's pride and joy. Many rare specimens are here. This, for instance," he pointed to a drooping stem bearing a close-leafed bud. It struck Galtieri as insipid among so many gorgeous blooms; it was not even in flower. He failed to catch the Latin syllables which Borges uttered at him; the rank odour of the place was already making him feel slightly bilious.

"The doctor maintains several other culture houses," Borges continued, still in hushed tones, "as well as an arboretum close to the New Forest. His study of plant life is comprehensive. Ah, here is Doctor Mengele now."

Pale light behind him, a tall saturnine figure became framed in a doorway at the far end of the glasshouse. The doctor called out to them. "Come in at once. There is barely time for explanation." They quickened their pace, approaching through tangled rows of fleshy petal.

His curiosity by now at high pitch, Galtieri entered a smallish, quiet room with all the contemplative atmosphere of a shrine. Its shape was oval. The walls were screened by plush lavender drapes, except at the far end where the oval motif was echoed in the shape of an ornately framed hanging mirror.

A circular well filled with earth occupied the centre of the tiled floor. Planted in it was what Galtieri took at first to be a bush standing about four feet high. On looking more closely, however, he wasn't so sure. The 'bush' was roughly spherical in shape, considerably flattened on top, but its finely-branched structure was not, perhaps, quite bush-like...it appeared to be composed not of twigs and leaves but of spindly many-hued moss. Through this fuzzy reticulated forest one could see right to the heart of the plant. Gazing at it for more than a few moments made the 'bush' seem to shimmer...

Being no botanist and scarcely knowing one plant from another, Galtieri could not say if the bush was anything unusual. More surprising was to see Borges open his case and proceed to set up the seeing machine on the floor, angling the concave receptor so as to take in the plant.

"Why are you doing that?" he murmured.

"To capture the moment, Señor Galtieri," Borges muttered. He appeared slightly embarrassed. "To extend the machine's experience."

Closing the door behind them, Doctor Mengele strode to a section of drape and pulled a tasselled cord. The drape drew aside to reveal a VDU and keyboard. Mengele depressed a key: the display screen came alive and split, portraying multi-trace oscillations on one half and ever-changing scripted data on the other. Galtieri also noted what appeared to be a countdown in seconds.

Mengele turned to face them. He frowned momentarily at the seeing machine, then began to speak.

"Señores, what I have to show you is not only a victory for Argentinian science, but may be of considerable significance for life on our planet. To be brief, some years ago I engaged myself upon a study of what are known as phytotoxins. This is a term covering all those substances which plants manufacture to defend themselves against disease or injury. Quinine, cocaine, natural antibiotics, the active agents in herbal remedies, and various psychotropic drugs, are examples of the way these substances have entered into human usage since early times, and of course modern research has extracted thousands more such agents from the plants around us. The truth is that the resources of botanical nature exceed by far the inventiveness and capacity for synthesis possessed by any pharmaceutical industry, and have scarcely been touched by us as yet. I have no doubt that cures for every conceivable disease, and agents for inducing every possible psychological state, are to be found in some little-known and unregarded plant or other. Yes, the vegetable kingdom is far wiser than we are. Is it any wonder? Plant life made an empire of Earth millions of years before metazoa appeared. From the first it was assailed by bacteria and later by fungi, but it learned to resist all onslaughts and went from strength to strength. It has had all that while, a measure of time incomparably longer than our short span, in which to face the rigours of life and to add to its knowledge and capability."

Galtieri noted with what assurance Mengele spoke now that he was on his own subject. There was little trace of the shy, nervous man of earlier in the day; his manner amounted almost to arrogance. "What are we to make of the vastness of this vegetable wisdom?" he went on slowly. "Such arcane and fathomless chemistries must betoken an ability, yes, even an intelligence, superior to our own...is this an absurd proposition? Yes, to our minds it must be, because there is a fundamental difference between plant and animal life which we assume to be decisively in our favour. I refer to the fact that an animal, particularly a mammal, is a highly individualised being. Plants by contrast are relatively non-individual - incidentally this is what makes it perfectly simple to clone a plant, whereas it is very difficult to clone a higher mammal. When we look at a plant, therefore, we are apt to be unimpressed by it as an entity...yet take away the presumption that to be an individual is all that matters, and what a vista the plant world presents. Indeed, who is to say that our hyper-individualised mode of existence, our insistence on clinging to our individual consciousnesses as our most precious possession, may not be a dead end? Will not the grass of the pampas outlive the entire human species? Even the entire animal kingdom, perhaps?"

Again Mengele paused to consult the VDU. As he touched a key a series of gentle, randomly changing tones emanated from a speaker. Galtieri knew the trick. Every living organism generated electric fields: convert them to sound by means of a transducer, and the electrical sensitivity of a plant became audible.

"Sometimes, our discussion begins to enter the intuitive philosophical sphere," Mengele resumed. "So let us quit this over-mechanistic century, and return to an age more imbued with great ideas: specifically, to the age of Goethe, the towering thinker and dramatist who

was the author of Faust. Goethe felt himself obliged to fight a rear-guard action against the march of reductionism in the life sciences, indeed against the whole concept of progressive evolution, and he denied flatly the modern view that species somehow lift themselves by their bootstraps as they radiate and diversify across the planet. With regard to plant life, at any rate, he believed the reverse: that the entire vegetable kingdom has devolved from a single fabulous primordial plant, the *ur-plant*, or *ur-plant*, a plant containing the characteristics of every possible future plant, and which suddenly appeared on the bare Earth, I suppose, as a direct expression of the creative spirit abroad in the world. Every vegetable variety and species now existing, according to Goethe, is a fragment of this original magical master-plant.

"I see you smiling, Doctor Fraga, and of course the *ur-plant* could never have existed physically on the primitive Earth. Yet I contend that Goethe's intuition was sound. He perceived that the vegetable kingdom has a non-individual content, that it comprises, so to speak, scattered parts of one huge entity. In his mind's eye, he saw the *ur-plant*.

"His mistake was in supposing that it lay in the past, instead of the future."

After a glance at his watch, Mengele quickened his speech slightly. "Señores, you know that I am the son of another great man, who taught me all there is to know on the subject of genetic manipulation. My research into phytochemicals led me to conceive a great work: the fusing together of the genetical heritage of the entire botanical biosphere. Just as in cloning, nucleic fusion can be accomplished much more easily with plant cells than with animal... obviously not every single variety and species could contribute – it would take a thousand years – and therefore selection was the first stage to contemplate. In this I worked by instinct, by intuition, almost, I felt, by divine guidance. I tackled the problem at the source, spending two reclusive years in the depths of the Amazonian Reserve, still Earth's largest rain forest and a fabulous treasure house for the botanist's point of view. There I discovered no less than fifty-nine unrecorded species, many with marvellous properties. If the *ur-plant* were ever at some date to come about by spontaneous hybridisation then the Reserve is where the miracle would occur. But we have no need to wait for nature to accomplish the work, Señores, for I, at last, succeeded in creating the Master Plant. What you see before you is none other than Goethe's *ur-plant*, which has existed on Earth as a spiritual presence for all these aeons, and now exists as a reality. Genes from nearly five thousand distinct species are blended into its enormous chromosomes. It has every conceivable vegetable capability.

"It does not look much like the primordial plant that is all plants, I see you remarking to yourselves? Should not such a plant be a prodigious mixture of features, an explosion of leaves, stems, woods and flowers? And so it is. But these features are potential, resident in its genes, and will express themselves as the occasions arise in the course of its aeons-long lifetime. There is no substance with an organic or psychological role that this plant cannot synthesise, no vegetable structure it cannot give forth. If by some

mischance all other plant life on Earth were destroyed and this alone remained, it would act as Goethe believed it originally acted, propagating and devolving into all species and varieties.

"I come now to the reason why I asked you here on this specific date, at this specific time. The truth is, Señores, that I am responsible only in part for the *ur-plant*'s genetic architecture. In the course of its development many qualities emerged which I could not have foreseen but which are derived, I would posit, from the Platonic spirit of the *ur-plant* that has always been with us. Among these features are its clocks.

"All living organisms incorporate internal clocks, often capable of remarkable patience and precision. There is, for instance, an orchid in the jungles of Malaya which blooms but once in ten years, and remains open for no more than a few minutes. In that brief time the requisite insect must find it, must enter and deposit pollen taken from a similar orchid. Surprisingly, the *ur-plant* is like this flowering orchid. It blooms but once in a million years; whereupon, its flower remains open for approximately nine seconds.

"I say surprisingly, for we should ask ourselves, what does it stand ready to receive? Certainly not pollen from another *ur-plant*! – it requires none, it is completely self-sufficient. Whatever it can be expected to be commensurate with the scale of being of the *ur-plant* itself, and we may learn its nature in a very short while, Señores, for if my calculations are correct the orchid will unfold at two minutes past midnight!"

Mengele stepped again to the keyboard. The countdown was approaching zero when he raised the sound volume so that the pleasant tones of the *ur-plant* filled the room. Suddenly they altered in character. New tones were added: the changes in pitch increased in pace, became more melodic, less random as the ensemble swelled upwards towards a climax. It was, Galtieri thought, like Mozart at his most ethereal. But no – the music had no vestige of tonality. Mozart interpreted by Schoenberg: unearthly, strange, interspersed with chords that could never, somehow, quite become familiar.

That was not all that was happening. He had scarcely noticed the little bud in the middle of the flattened top of the bush. It seemed incredible that so gigantic a flower could emerge, and at so rapid a rate, from so small a space. And of all the fantastic shapes and brilliant colours of exotic flowers found in the forests of the world, this was surely the most fantastic. Fields of pure snow, shining in radiant sunlight, could not compete with its dazzling whiteness, which was fringed with rippling rainbows. In graceful, curving arcs it stretched itself fully six feet from rim to rim, presenting a tremulously expectant floral radar dish to the zenith. And to the heavenly music, to the blinding whiteness, was added a third element, for the flower exuded an overpowering perfume. Galtieri's consciousness began to swim, to sink. There was a hint of roses in the perfume, of jasmine, of sharp pine – what did it not have a hint of? – but it was strong, too strong, and it was drowning him. Galtieri felt his knees buckle, and as he fell he saw the others around him stagger, too, then collapse like rag dolls.

He was on the floor, his cheek against the cold tile.

Then he seemed to lose all contact with his senses. Instead of the floor, he was lying on a bare gravelly mound, which in some way he understood to be the planet Earth, a dank-smelling hill surrounded by an indistinct void. A presence was in this void, and it spoke, but not in words, and not to him. With each unpersonalised statement tangled images flashed out in the apparently empty void – arboretic, dendritic images of fern and flower, bush and branch. The presence seemed never to stop speaking, had been speaking all the time.

A pause, an aside: Let us see that new branch that started... The bosky tangle vanished, and instead he saw the figure of a man, as if in an anatomy book. In one shiver of cognisance every somatic system was gone through – nervous, pulmonary, vascular, lymphatic, skeletal, immune: the man was turned inside out, then dropped into the void like a discarded leaf. But not before Galtieri glimpsed the face of the man. It was not modern man. Not Hispanic man, or Aryan man, or even Cro-Magnon man. Not, really, any man; more reminiscent of those human types said to predate homo sapiens sapiens, with the low swept-back brow, the protruding jaw, the posture that was not, yet, quite erect...

A question burst forth, almost agonisedly, from Galtieri's mind. Where are the individuals? There weren't any. There were models, geists, the annihilating of congregations into pure abstractions. Even the speaking presence was not an individual, though the wordless voice remarked, as the image of man disappeared, Here is your gift, your foudcation. Something fell from far above, a golden, fermenting haze.

Blurring like rain on a window, the vision faded, the voice receding into inaudibility. Galtieri discovered that he lay nowhere; he was still on his feet, gazing at the ur-plant. No one had collapsed to the floor and everything was as it had been, except that the bloom that had dazzled, blinded and drugged him had already withered, and hung from its supporting stem shrivelled to the size of a dead oakleaf.

The electrostatic music, too, had subsided to a soporific monotone, rising and falling in a banal tune: sated detumescence.

Mengle moved to kill both screen and speaker. His eyes were afire.

"There you have it, Señores. You have just witnessed an event that, quite possibly, will not be repeated in the lifetime of our species!"

A dead silence descended on the room.

Galtieri settled in his seat with a grunt, lulled by the quiet whistle of the plane's engine. His official car was in the cargo hold, but he had scorned the passenger compartment where he had only the chauffeur for company, and had come to sit with the pilot. From here he had a better view of the green and brown landscape as it passed below.

That morning, Doctor Mengle had breakfasted with him, asking if he had any further questions. Galtieri had shaken his head dumbly. For some reason he could not bring himself to discuss his experience of the night before with the doctor.

"Then may I be rash enough to ask how you judge my request...?"

"I will make arrangements for a team to guide you

into the Amazonian Reserve, Doctor. You may plant your monster in a place of your choosing." Galtieri rubbed his chin. "Will it propagate itself, do you think?"

"I do not know. Perhaps there does not need to be more than one specimen."

"I see...but you don't think there could be any danger to ourselves, do you? To mankind, I mean?"

"Of course not," Mengle had replied curtly. "Does a dog present a danger to the fleas that inhabit it?"

That should have been an end of the matter, but before leaving *Academia* he could not resist calling on Professor Borges. He had found the professor in a state of high excitement, staring fixedly at the seeing machine. He had installed it in his quarters in a niche in the wall, where it was flanked by floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

"Señor Galtieri! What are you doing here?" Borges cried in a voice almost of alarm.

"I came to say goodbye," Galtieri glanced from Borges to the seeing machine and back again. "Are you sure you are all right? Professor, I wanted to mention something. I experienced...a peculiar sensation during last night's demonstration..."

"Don't be shy! It happened to all of us! It was real!"

Galtieri was not sure if the news relieved him or not. "In that case, Professor, I would value your interpretation. Do you think..."

Borges took a step towards him and stared straight into his face. "The ancient doctrines are true," he said. "Do you know the Visions of Zosimos, the 3rd century alchemist? The stars give and the flowers receive. There it is in black and white what Goethe knew instinctively and Doctor Mengle has now proved."

"Receive? What do they receive?"

"Pollen," said Borges, staring harder. "Star pollen. What is pollen? It is fertilising information, that is all the genes are all in code. Some kind of information-bearing energy was donated to the ur-plant last night, exactly what I do not know. I only know that the entity donating it communicates constantly with our Earth: yet it lives on so vast a time scale that it does not see us at all. It does not see generations, or species, or probably even genera! What it talks to are orders and classes, perhaps entire phyla. No wonder it is a Platonic abstraction as far as we are concerned! Yet we felt its presence, did we not? For a moment, while we stood near it, the ur-plant was indeed Doctor Mengle's promised macro-scope!"

He turned away as if in a trance to stare at the seeing machine again. "Has that thing got you hypnotised?" Galtieri asked suspiciously, and was taken aback by the vehemence of Borges' retort. "Do not jest, Señor Galtieri. The machine was there too, remember, and just before the plant bloomed I pressed the memory key. Do you still not understand? The machine becomes what it sees – and it saw a god!"

"A god?" Galtieri echoed incredulously, and Borges instantly blurted out, "Yes, a god has come down from the stars and dwells with us in my machine. Its being, its identity, its awareness, is there, perceiving us now. A god – not an angel, not anything the Church teaches. So do what you please, Señor Galtieri, report me to the Holy Office if you must. Nail me upside down to a cross as you did the Anglican protestants – you will

not make me recant." And Galtieri, fearing the professor was about to fall to his knees, had stalked out in disgust.

The pampas, dotted with brown and black specks that were cattle, crawled by below. Galtieri thought he knew now what Professor Vegas had been trying to imply with his story of the portrait painter. Yes, he recalled that the old Doctor Mengele had for a time become almost infamous...he had been unfairly accused, of course. No scientist worth his salt would be able to resist an opportunity to study real, rather than surrogate subjects. But evidently the son was a sensitive soul: while still fired, for all that, by his father's great ideal of genetic excellence.

Exactly what had happened the previous night still puzzled Galtieri slightly. That his vision was chemically induced he did not doubt, but he rejected the notion that Mengele himself had introduced a drug into the air of the room; a Mengele could not be so underhand. Presumably, then, whatever it was had been exuded by the genetically modified plant, as a particularly potent kind of perfume...

He forced the memory from his mind, and resolved to restrict philosophical questions to his bedtime

reading in future. Practical affairs were more important, and these required his undivided attention. One: to re-establish the northern frontiers of Greater Argentina. Two: to regain control of the southern Atlantic. Three: at any cost to defend Antarctica, which would be made habitable one day, and peopled entirely by Argentínians would become the greatest power on Earth.

He smiled to think of poor Borges. He really did seem to think Galtieri would report him to the Holy Office! He would not do any such thing, of course. But imagine the professor kneeling in worship before his data machine, as though before a madonna!

The picture made Galtieri burst out laughing. The pilot grinned in sympathy. "Something amuses you, Señor?"

"Ah, it is these scientists," Galtieri chuckled. "I tell you, Lieutenant, they are all as crazy as gringos!"

Barrington Bayley has been publishing sf for nearly 30 years, and is renowned for the originality of his ideas. Some of his best short stories are to be found in the collection *The Knights of the Limits*. His most recent novel is *The Pillars of Eternity*.

· IN REVIEW ·

In Viriconium by M. John Harrison (Gollancz, £6.95)

This is the third (and, I believe, the last) novel in Harrison's "Viriconium sequence". The books do not constitute a trilogy in the normal sense of the term, for they are all very different. *The Pastel City* (1972) was a colourful exercise in the packing-in of action; a sword-and-sorcery pastiche by a highly talented new writer. *A Storm of Wings* (1980) was a lush and involved fantasy of far-future decadence. In *Viriconium* is slimmer and altogether harder and sparer. It is not futuristic in the least: Viriconium, although it is a city from some alternate dimension, has all the grittiness of a present-day London or Manchester. Or perhaps one should say the Left Bank of Paris, for the principal characters are artists. The plot concerns an attempt to rescue the painter Audsley King from a sinister "plague zone". The zone itself is a symbol of lassitude, philistinism, entropy: it is the creeping death which overtakes art and life. Harrison excels in the moody description of this process, and in the depiction of the fitzneric efforts which the characters make to overcome it. This is a bitingly funny novel, full of barbed traps set to catch the reader's complacency. (DP)

The Transmigration of Timothy Archer by Philip K. Dick (Gollancz, £6.95)

There is no dodging the abiding death-relatedness of *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*. Of its four central characters, three are dead by the end of the novel; more importantly, the text of the book itself comprises in the main a 200 page flashback on the part of the survivor in her attempt to come to grips with the abiding omnipresent deaths of her husband (Jeff Archer) and her father-in-law (Bishop Timothy Archer) and his mistress (Kirsten Lundborg). So the novel contains deaths and is about death, and begins on the day of John Lennon's murder, and we do all by now know about the most important death irradiating the text, the death of its author. Unlike Timothy Archer's, Philip K. Dick's death came from a massive physiological collapse – a stroke leading to brain-death. Like Archer's, his death came like the appointment in Samarra. And like Archer's (and despite rumours to the contrary), his death was confining but not collective.

The novel is hypomanic, witty, obsessively word-bound, deeply

frightening. There is some comic-book Chinese torture in which the client's eyes are fastened open, so that he cannot escape the knowledge of precisely what is happening in him, and so that his organs of perception themselves cause unremitting agony. So with the characters in Archer. They act as though the issues underlying metaphysical haverings were real, and deadly: as though madness (devastatingly displayed, as always in late Dick) were real (it is); as though drugs and God and personality-rapes and the true pre-Christian nature of the Eucharist (whose mushroom-releaser Archer dies in a Middle Eastern desert trying to unearth) were the genuine ineluctable stuff of life (would they were: would they were not). The novel is sane in every word, despite its superfluous deranging matter, and by the same technique Dick used in *VALIS* (Timothy Archer is another Henselover Fat); the narrator is another (and the same) Dick. Their collusion, here and in Samarra, makes them live on, of course. We have them if we have art at all. (JC)

Psyche by Amanda Hemingway (Faber, £7.95)

A desolate planet on the edge of the galaxy; a buried city; the most precious mineral in the universe; a hermit mad scientist; an ill-matched pair of villains, one a thug, the other a sophisticated; the most beautiful where in the world – Hemingway's novel has all the elements of a Keith Laumer space romp, but how differently deployed. While she refuses to take it quite seriously, Hemingway is clearly aware that her material does in fact derive from older traditions, Gothic and even Shakespearean. Her heroine Psyche Gonzin lives in a windowless castle of steel with her father the reclusive psychologist, an elderly mate *matinee*, and a computer full of brainprints. Twenty-three years old, Psyche is totally ignorant of human society until Trase, her unknown sister, arrives; and, on the same shuttle, a mercenary adventurer called Karel Varagin. Hemingway makes use of her thriller plot to evoke Psyche's retarded and agonised awakening to the existence of other people, balancing it against the painful readjustment of Varagin, whose sensibilities prove less calloused than he intended. It is a story of desperate movements in a frigid atmosphere. If Hemingway's prose consequently begins to take on the attributes of her characters – chilly, bleak, determined – her writing remains shapely and highly readable: a confident and unusual first novel. (CG)

LETTERS

Dear *Interzone*,

Interzone 3 dragged me through so many opinions and emotions, ranging from high euphoria to downright misery, that I felt I had to write and tell you about my feelings on the various stories. So, in descending order of preference:

By far the best piece for me in this issue was Garry Kilworth's story "The Disembled". An absolutely astonishing work that dealt with dangerous ideas in an exciting way. It might not fit in with everybody's rigid definitions of sf, but who cares? It was explosively good, so you published it. Enough said. Accompanying the story was the best piece of artwork in the magazine. So strong and realistic was Iain Byers' drawing that before I checked out the credits I thought it was a photograph — the *Interzone* committee reserving the right to reply to Charles Platt's criticisms perhaps?

Josephine Saxton's piece "No Coward Soul" I would place as the second most interesting in this issue. As often with Josephine Saxton's writings we were bombarded with a heady profusion of words, which during the time of reading were very engrossing, but were, for me, too wild and enigmatic, and lacking in overall vision to provide lasting memories. An attempt at something new, however, and so should be recognised and applauded for that alone.

I thought at first Nicholas Allan's "Cheek to Cheek" was just going to be some sort of lengthy rendition of a dirty joke. However, it developed into a quite interesting, if really rather minor little piece, and the description of the episode with the nail scissors had me squirming in anticipation and genuine feeling of the pain being inflicted.

The story that most irritated me was David Garnett's "Saving the Universe". A potentially very interesting idea of a time bomb causing fragmentation of time zones was totally wasted, instead of taking primary place it became an oasis in a wide desert of pathetic cliché references, of cannibalising itself. It is the sort of thing "mainstream" critics point to, with much justification, when putting down science fiction.

Angela Carter's "Overture for 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'" was, for me, though, by far the worst story in this issue. It was flat, silly and twee. I mean, cuckoo spit is really fairly sperm?

So, a very mixed reaction, which I suppose if looked at objectively is virtually inevitable in a collection of pieces by different authors. Still, good wishes for the next issue.

Philip Collins

Hither Green, London

Dear *Interzone*,

Being an imaginative fiction magazine it is ironic that it should be the imagination of its readers that has led to an initial disappointment with *Interzone* in some quarters — but this is what I believe. Prior to publication *Interzone* was touted as a magazine seeking the finest writing in imaginative literature, which created the impression that each issue would be a literary jewel, each story a masterpiece. I think that this is what I subconsciously expected, for I had a vague sense of anti-climax on reading the first issues. The stories were good, but were they classics? Would I remember them in twenty years time? When I thought about the matter rationally, though, I realised that reality could do nothing but fall short of the perfect works I was expecting; classics are written rarely, and it is unfair to expect *Interzone* to publish five in every issue.

Rather than compare *Interzone* against the readership's preconceptions of it, I think it would be fairer to use the other magazines in the field as the yardstick. Here it is clear that *Interzone* has displayed a standard of fiction far above any of its competitors: for instance, while *F&SF* may publish a Ballard story once in a blue moon, it is difficult to imagine them printing either of the pieces you have published by Angela Carter.

I hope that people will begin to judge *Interzone* on its merits; if that happens it can only succeed.

Paul Baxter

Oxford

Dear *Interzone*,

I have always wondered, as someone who lectures in English literature, what the term "science fiction" actually means (I presume it is, literally, fiction which involves, or explores the possibilities of science), and I'm gratified to see that the inadequacy of the expression has been realised in *Interzone*. Science fiction proper (robots, H.G. Wells, buzz-guns, and interplanetary passports), at least as far as literature is concerned, is, I believe, for the moment dead. However, it seems a kind of new-wave strain has been born from the genre: perhaps it isn't science fiction at all, but a surreal fiction, a superimposition of the weird on the ordinary, or what I would call 'kitchen-sink science fiction'. I can think of no better example of this than Nicholas Allan's charming and witty story "Cheek To Cheek". This has as its theme nothing more down-to-earth than a very simple adolescent love affair, but through a 'science-fiction' device it is elevated into a genuinely poignant episode, an episode which is not 'other worldly' at all, but common to everyone.

Josephine Saxton attempts a similar technique in "No Coward Soul", except the device in this case, of auto-brain surgery, is as involved as to owning the feminist sentiment implied in the title.

So, rather than take a last-ditch, self-mocking attitude towards science-fiction, as does David Garnett in "Saving the Universe", I think that writers of this genre should concern themselves much more directly with our world, our planet, our lives, utilising the imaginative leaps of science fiction technique (the direction Duch has taken with *The Man Who Had No Idea*). It is here that *Interzone's* strength might lie, in promoting those stories which fuse science and mainstream fiction. It is time to stop writing about the incredible and to write about the ordinary, the common-place, in incredible ways.

Malcolm Younger

Barnsbury, London

Dear *Interzone*,

Since I'm a keen sf fan I have been buying *Interzone* expecting stories of a high quality. It's certainly true that some of the stories have been excellent (Keith Roberts' "Kitchenwater", Ballard's "Memories of the Space Age") but the more I read *Interzone* the more I have become aware that a) many of the stories I am reading are not of at all and b) these stories which are not of are, in fact, pornography.

The most obvious example of this is Nicholas Allan's story "Cheek to Cheek" (though Moorcock's "Brother in Rosenstrasse" is a close second). In almost every sentence, beginning with the first, Mr Allan manages to make a direct, or at least indirect reference to the narrator's or his girlfriend's private parts, usually both simultaneously. Since the story is solely about their sexual organs perhaps it isn't surprising, but Mr Allan seems to relish it, at the expense of any feeling about the relationship he's trying to write about.

This story seems to suggest a prevalent idea among so-called writers, that if itself is no longer a valid form of writing, and that the only way to compensate for its decline is to inject it with sex, usually of a kinky nature, as if sexual fantasy is somehow akin to science fiction.

But, much in the same way that I think "Cheek to Cheek" undermines the sanctity of love, pornography destroys the essence of what it is really about. I would like to see less of this kind of story in *Interzone* and more of the genuine article.

R. Waters

London

Malcolm Edwards replies:

We have stressed from the outset that *Interzone* is not just a science fiction magazine: that we aim to publish sf, fantasy, and other related imaginative writing. Within this area our intention is to bring you the most imaginative and best-written stories we can find. If we received more traditional sf stories which came up to those standards we would be only too happy to print them.

GOLLANCZ

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